UNKNOWN Worlds

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BLIND ALLEY . . . by Malcolm Jameson

Mr. Feathersmith was disgusted with the ways of 1943; he longed for the scenes and the forthright manners of his Nineteenth Century boyhood. But getting back to those times was humanly impossible—but a Satanic cinch! Back to the days of his youth went Mr. Feathersmith. But somehow—somewhere—something was wrong—

SCRIBERDEGIBIT . . by Anthony Boucher

"May I be cursed!" said Gilbert Iles—and his wish was most effectively granted. He hadn't specified the type of curse, so the demon assigned to the case just gave him anything handy—the curse of a sin a day. Which shouldn't have been hard for a lawyer to manage, or to argue himself out of. But a sin isn't fun at all when you have to!

THE WISHES WE MAKE . . by E. M. Hull

Kennijahn had a destiny; the court had said "Hanged by the neck until you are dead—" but the Fates had given him a destiny; death by hanging. But Kennijahn had gotten a certain power over a demon—and six wishes. Six wishes to try to beat that destiny the Fates had fixed—

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* * *

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

Contents for June, 1943, Vol. VII, No. 1

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Assistant Editor

Novelettes

WHEESHT! . . . . . **Cleve Cartmill** 9
He had enough on his mind trying to trap spies as a counterespionage agent without a too-patriotic leprechaun to gum the works!

BLIND ALLEY . . . . . **Malcolm Jameson** 48
Back to the Good Old Days of his youth, with memory intact, and with the aid of the Devil—back to things his intact memory hadn't remembered at all—

SRIBERDEGIBIT . . . . . **Anthony Boucher** 81
"May I be cursed!" said he—and, there being a wimp around, he was. He wasn't particular about it, so he just got the handiest old curse around—but a good one!

THE HOUNDS OF KALIMAR . . . . . **P. Schuyler Miller** 130
Man took the world away from the beasts, and did it before his fingers had learned the art of tools. Even with Kalimar directing them, a man was dangerous to the Hounds.

Short Stories

THE WISHES WE MAKE . . . . . **E. M. Hull** 35
He had six wishes—and a fated end. The wishes would give him anything he asked, but there still remained his destiny of death in a noose. How to use those wishes—

A BARGAIN IN BODIES . . . . . **Moses Schorr** 71
The townsfolk could not see the burden he carried, but all knew it was there—and that a demon walked with him to keep it there. One got a chance to force a bargain on that demon, and used it—

THE RABBIT AND THE RAT . . . . . **Robert Arthur** 102
The rabbity little man had a human rat to deal with—and a way to deal with him that made ordinary life imprisonment a pleasure. For the human rat was confined forever in a rat.

THE DEVIL IS NOT MOCKED . . . . . **Manly Wade Wellman** . . . 115
Transylvania has been conquered many times—but it has its defenders, defenders who grow stronger with every conquest, gaining recruits from every invader!

EIGHT BALL . . . . . **Hugh Raymond** 120
There was a trick to getting the ball-within-a-ball arranged. Rather a delicate trick that, if it went wrong, didn't exactly put you behind the eight-ball, it put you—

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER . . . . . **Theodore Sturgeon** 126
Shooing off a jealous lover is ordinarily something of a problem, but when the jealous one is a ghost, and a ghost with a nasty habit of haunting most unpleasantly his more solid rivals—

Readers' Departments

OF THINGS BEYOND 6

BOOK REVIEWS 154

Illustrations by: Alfred, Hall, Isip, Kolliker, Kramer and Orban

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Gremlins Breed Fast

The gremlin tribe was introduced to the general public not much more than a year ago; at present the tribe is known throughout the United Nations, a spread of territory covering most of the world already, and increasing at a healthy rate of annual growth. But the gremlins outbreed rabbits, even Australian rabbits, conquer territory faster than any military force or combination of military forces, and have been reported in almost every field of semimechanized human endeavor.

Appearing first as purely air-minded evolvements of the original Little Folk native to the British Isles, they have apparently learned to specialize and then diversify. Gremlins showing particular mechanical aptitude appear to have first concentrated on greminxing—"jinxing", when done by a gremlin instead of a jinx—airplane engines, then spread their operations to the airplane type engines of tanks, perhaps training their young widgits on the simpler engines of motorcycles, jeeps and trucks. This subspecies of gremlin is now, we are told by various petroleum product manufacturers, active on the American home front, and best combated by a dose of motor oil or chassis grease.

Photographers claim to have snapped pictures of the wee beasties in the act of greminxing their cameras. Probably this subspecies started operations on aerial reconnaissance cameras, followed the films into the darkroom, and then followed fresh film on its way out to the more ordinary cameras of military and news photographers. These photo-minded gremlins specialize in sticking their thumbs over the lens, thus blocking off large hunks of scenery, usually the part including the desired action, or changing the lens-stop to a smaller opening, resulting in a gross underexposure. Sometimes they simply bounce up and down on the camera during exposure to blur the picture by camera movement, or stick their hands into the shutter mechanism so the shutter sticks open, ruining the film. In cold weather, signs of their presence in roll film and film pack may be discovered. They apparently like to roll up in the film, imitating the classic bug in a rug. If the film is then moved quickly, the gremlin's scramble to safety and warmth leaves definite marks, like tiny lightning tracks, all over the film, marks that have, in the past, been mistaken for static electricity spark trails.

It looks as though the spread of gremlins was not only unopposed, but in some manner greatly aided by a universal, highly effective fifth column organization. As a matter of fact, there is every indication that the Ancient and Universal Order of Buck Passers is the organization behind their wide and rapid spread. It is a well-established fact that this truly Ancient and Universal Order assisted the spread and nurtured the growth of the brownie, the troll, leprechaun, goblin, cobald, nickel, jinx, and unnumbered other species of such invisible and omnipresent trouble causers. The equally Ancient and Honorable Order of Tall Tale Tellers has assisted in this work as innocent and unconscious agents in the spread of the trouble makers, but has to some extent modified them under an uplift program designed to make them useful and helpful citizens.

But the real reason for their wide and rapid conquest is the wholly conscious and malevolent fifth column work of the Buck Passers, beyond question. The Order can well claim to be Ancient and Universal, if not honorable. They claim, and rightly, we understand, that Adam was the originator of the Order, as well as of other things.

THE EDITOR.

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Wheesht!

by Cleve Cartmill

Keeping under cover the fact that you are a counterespionage agent is enough of a job—without the intrusion of the family leprechaun!

Illustrated by Orban

Professor Gartz and I stood in my front door and looked at the pile of potatoes on my living-room floor.

"Uncle Pete's dead," I thought. "And at a time like this."

"Hineman," said Gartz, "is someone making jokes with you?"

I didn't answer. I was busy thinking what this meant. The coming-to-stay present, the potatoes, indicated a complication in my life that I didn't want. I already had my work cut out for me; I had to become a bona fide member of Gartz's un-bona fide organization. That would be a neat trick under easy conditions. Complications might be the death of me. Literally.

"Why don't you answer me?" he snapped.

I looked at him and grinned. That was the hard part, for he had a skull-like physiognomy with great, deep-set black eyes. It was hard to grin.

"I was counting to ten," I said cheerfully, "before telling what I would do to my grocery boy. I could be arrested for what I had in mind."

His wide, thin lips changed. Not into a smile, but they changed. That was something, at least.

"Come in," I went on. "We can go over our plans. A few potatoes won't bother that. No, look. Sit down on that couch. I'll get you a drink and clear out the spuds."

He folded his long frame and I got a box from the kitchen. I looked under furniture as I went—chairs, tables, sink, icebox. But there was no small, bright-eyed form anywhere in sight.

As I might have known, though, he was in the cupboard, curled around a bottle of Irish whiskey. His turned-up shoes formed a cockeyed kind of cross, one tiny hand was relaxed on his pot-belly, his wrinkled little face was in repose, and his peaked hat hung on another bottle.

He was asleep.

The bottle around which he curled was not full.

I took another, so as not to disturb him, and glasses and soda. I mixed drinks, and while Gartz sipped his, I filled the box with potatoes and took them into the kitchen. I was very quiet. I did not want to wake Seag. Not yet.

"Now," Gartz said precisely when I was seated with a glass in my hand, "I have a few facts for you." He dipped a long yellow hand in his brief case and

came out with a sheet of paper. "We have investigated you. You understand the necessity."

"Of course," I said easily. I had no fears on that score. We had worked it out too carefully in the department.

"We found," he said, referring to the paper, "that Louella Hineman died giving birth to her son, James, or you."

"I never knew her," I said, sadly.

"Harold Hineman," he continued, "took care of his baby brother for three years before necessity forced him to place the child in an orphanage. James Hineman ran away from the orphanage at the age of twelve. Since then until three years ago when you joined the staff of Hart College, nothing is known of the activities of James Hineman except that he attended various schools."

"Night schools, mostly," I said. "I gave you a list. You could have checked."

"We did," he said. "But the most important factor in your character analysis is missing. Why are you willing to work against the interests of your own country? We have found nothing in your history which would justify such a course."

I had an answer for that one. Hal Hineman, my bogus brother, and a man from the Washington office had worked it out together, with me doing the listening.

"You don't publicize certain things that happen to you," I said in a bitter voice. "I was kicked around, from soup line to soup line, for years. Flop houses knew me well. I couldn't get a job because of my eyes, and I couldn't afford glasses. Why should I care anything about this country? It damned near killed me. Sure you didn't find out about it. I used one name and another. Why, at one time," I said with a slight snicker, "I used the name of Mike O'Brien because nobody but Irish could get into a certain police department. I rated high on the examination, but somebody's nephew was passed over me."

His expression changed. His lips actually curled up, and he looked like a happy death's-head. I breathed easier. It was possible they had run into the name O'Brien, for they had checked much more carefully than we thought they would. Better for me to drag it into the open than dig up an explanation of why I was known as Mike at one time.

I rushed on, more confident now, and laid it on thick. "That, of course, is a minor matter. My hardships, I mean. You ask what I have against this country. Do we have any voice in its government? No. The Jews own everything, and it makes me sick—sick, understand?—to see Aryans take orders from them! I want to see a housecleaning! I want to see a *man* administrate this government! Hell, I have nothing against the country. It's the people who run it. What right-thinking person wouldn't like to see a blundering so-called democracy transformed into an efficient Socialist State?" I broke off, glanced fearfully around. "I'm talking too loud. Maybe these walls can hear and talk."

He made a sound of contempt. "No fear," he said. "These crazy Americans never suspect anything, the stupid cattle. As to the conditions which you abhor, we shall change all that. You have read the works of our Leader."

"Yes," I said. My hushed awe was pretty good, I thought.

"Very well," Gartz went on crisply. "Certain points are clear which were not clear before. Are you positive that you can get into your brother's factory?"

I was prepared for this, too. "Let's have another drink, and I'll show you." I poured and mixed, then went to my corner desk and took out a letter. I gave it to Gartz.

He read it carefully. Hineman wanted me to come and have a beer with him, and look over the factory.

Stay as long as I liked, look as much as I liked.

" 'Telephone me when you arrive,' " Gartz read aloud, " 'and I will have you passed through the gate.' Yes," Gartz mused, "one must have official connections to get inside a defense project. Very official. Have you ever been affiliated in any way with the government? Military intelligence, or any other branch?"

I didn't break off sipping my drink. I finished the swallow as if the question had no significance whatever. "Hell, man, he's my brother. You know the quaint attitude here. One's family can do no wrong. Even treason will be covered up by a man's immediate family."

"That, too, shall be changed," he murmured.

"I don't need official connections," I went on, "to visit my own brother."

He rose and stood at attention. "James Hineman, you are now a member of the intelligence service of the greatest power in the world. You will put nothing before service to the country of your choice."

"My own country, really," I interrupted. "I'm only two generations from there."

"True. Spoken like a patriot. Now, here are your instructions. You will operate independently. Anything and everything you learn of military significance, however unimportant it may seem to you, you will notate and give to me. Through me it will find its way to the homeland. We are desperate for facts."

I thought I might as well have a try at the information I wanted from him. "Suppose," I said, "that I get in a jam and can't come back here. Suppose I don't dare communicate with you. Is there somebody else I could go to?"

He gave me a long steady look, which I met without so much as an eyelid flutter. He pursed his thin lips and placed the tips of his long yellow fingers together.

"There are," he said, "a few hundred of us, in various parts of the nation. We are of all nationalities, but with a single ideal. We are not registered, nor are we known to have any leanings which might conflict with the present war effort. You understand the need for secrecy."

"Of course, but I'm not going to squawk."

"I'll be quite frank with you, Hineman. You are new. I know nothing of how far you will go without breaking down. When I am satisfied, I shall tell you who we are. Until then, you

are, so to speak, a probationer."

And God help me, I thought, if I make a slip.

"All right," I said. "Fair enough. Now, listen. I have a hunch— I haven't heard it in so many words— that my brother's factory is assembling the most secret and powerful military weapon of all time. You've undoubtedly heard rumors of it."

He had, for I had circulated them.

"I shall set myself the task," I went on, "of delivering complete information concerning this weapon. But I must have a leave of absence, because I can't get it over a week end."

"That is simple," he said. "As the head of your department, I can arrange it. Make your application tomorrow in writing, and I shall approve it. Give a logical reason."

"My ailing grandmother?" I suggested.

"Good enough," he replied thoughtfully. "I assume that nobody here knows that your grandmother died in 1899?"

"Was that the year? I'd forgotten."

He rose to his feet, unfolding like a hinge, and nodded. "Good luck. *Heil!*"

I had to force it, but it came out all right. *"Heil!"*

"Heil!" said another voice.

Gartz whirled, glared toward the kitchen. "What was that?"

"Echo," I said airily. "I've damned near scared myself to death on several occasions. When you say something with the right pitch and volume, the kitchen vibrates and throws it back. Listen." I tried to reproduce my exclamation. *"Heil!"*

Silence.

"Heil!" I repeated.

Still silence. I shrugged.

"Guess I missed it."

Gartz walked to the kitchen, stared around, and came back. "Let us hope," he said silkily, "that it was truly an echo. I should be sad if it were not. Very sad."

"I should, also," I said, and meant it, for one thin hand was in his coat pocket. I had a feeling that neither the hand nor pocket was empty.

After a long thoughtful stare, he went away.

"Heil!" said the voice from the kitchen again.

I turned with slitted eyes. Seag stood in the doorway, and his tiny face was grim. His eyes sparkled, and he slapped his green-clad legs with peaked hat. But he made no comment on what he must have overheard. He got into the formalities.

"Michael Anthony Patrick Francis O'Brien! It's sad news I bring ye, lad."

"So Uncle Pete's dead, eh? I'm sorry. How did he die?"

"'Twas awful," Seag replied, canting his hat over one eye. "I tried to save him, but 'twas beyont even me own magical powers. Like a giant I labored, lad, night and day for eighteen days and nights. I brought him breath o' th' bogs, and a fairy stew. I brought him bowls of moonlight. I recited spells and incantations till me poor throat was raw. Not a wink o' sleep, lad. I—"

"I'm sure you did all you could, Seag. How did he die?"

"'Twas th' ginger ale, lad. Poison. One glass, and th' poor man was no more."

"How much had he had to drink?"

"Only six bottle of Irish, lad."

"That'd kill anybody."

"But, lad!" he protested. 'Twas only quarts."

"All right, all right. So I'm the O'Brien now."

"And jist like yer father, lad. A mane of hair, black as a Dublin midnight fog. And yer eyes, blue as th' lakes of Carnachon. You stand like yer father, too, before he tried to steal the Blarney Stone—tall, broad of shoulder, lean of hip. In looks, lad, yer a credit to th' name." He repeated, with a sneer, "In looks."

I considered the leprechaun for some

time. I didn't want to make him angry. My great-great-great-grandfather, some two hundred years before, had made Seag furious once. Just once. Nobody had dared, after that. Each time the head of the clan died, he moved to the successor, and pretty much had his way. He gave plenty in return—if he felt inclined—but he had his way.

"How much did you eavesdrop on?" I asked.

"Enough to be shocked to the core of me, lad. That spalpeen which was here. He's evil, lad, th' shameful slubberdegullion. Surely 'tis not true you're having any truck with th' likes of him?"

Life, I thought. True, it was the most pleasant thing that had happened to me, as yet, but it was also the most bewildering. Life plays tricks. You scheme a scheme or dream a dream, and the first thing you know life has shattered it with some ridiculous and unforeseen club.

I knew Seag was with Uncle Pete, of course, for he was dad's younger brother. But the last I had heard from the old sot, he was in fine alcoholic health riding the crest of the Shasta water. So he up and died, and my carefully built background as an English professor which enabled me to contact the underground espionage through Gartz was endangered by the family leprechaun.

Why, I asked myself bitterly, did the original O'Brien have to befriend the little beast? But still I didn't want to anger him. So I answered his question.

"Circumstances make it necessary, Seag, that I have certain business dealings with Professor Gartz."

"Wheesht!" he said with contempt. "No circumstances are strong enough to pull down an O'Brien. And whut's this Hineman stuff, lad?"

"Circumstances again. I am known here as James Hineman, professor of English composition."

"Fah!" he snorted. "Little did I think I'd see the day an O'Brien would take the name of a foreigner. Lad, answer me, lad. Yer workin' against yer country. How can ye stomach it? This country has treated th' O'Briens well. It has fed and clothed and paid 'em so they could import Irish whiskey. Ye can't do it, lad. Ye must not."

"Believe me," I said, "on my honor as an O'Brien, what I'm doing is best for the country."

I couldn't tell him I was in counter-espionage. I hardly dared think it to myself. I had been told of those boys who had been detected and rubbed out. Myers, Riverson, Wakefielder, Harriman—each had tried to do the job I was assigned, and each had made a minor slip and disappeared.

Seag misunderstood me. "Fascism?" he asked, horrified. "Best for this country? Why, lad, do ye want to tear down everything this nation has stood for for years—centuries? Believe *me*, lad, you're wrong."

Well, how could I explain? If I said I wasn't trying to help any ism whatever, he'd figure it out. According to his own estimate, he'd spent the last eight hundred years figuring out human psychology, and this would be simple.

"I pledge my honor on what I'm doing," I said with dignity.

"No doubt, lad, ye think you're doin' right, but you're misinformed. You remind me of a werewolf I knew in Kansas City, me boy. Livin' off th' fat of th' land, he was, and never satisfied. 'America,' he'd snort. Well, I told him off, but I didn't convince him. I'm not makin' that mistake this time. I'm goin' to make you see th' light. You're an O'Brien, and it isn't fittin' you should drag th' grand old name down to th' level of madmen."

"Listen, Seag," I said. "I'm asking you, for old times' sake. Remember how I used to play with you when I was a little boy? Well, in memory of those times, I'm asking you to go away

till this business is finished."

He was shocked. His little eyes widened. He paced back and forth for a few small strides, then shinnied up the leg of a table and swung his feet over the edge. He stood on this and was almost level with my eyes.

"I've no place to go in th' first place," he said. "You're th' last of th' line. I must stay here and get you a wife, so th' name of O'Brien will be preserved. In th' second place, I wouldn't leave you while yer away in th' head. Yer poor brains is addled, lad, and it's up to me to set thim straight. And that I shall, and that's final."

I reflected gloomily that the only way I knew to get rid of him was to get married, have a son—and then shoot myself. I shrugged, and gave it up.

Seag had no further reason to remain visible, so he faded out. I went to work on my lecture for the next day. I heard him scurrying around while I wrote, cleaning out corners, looking in drawers.

At eleven o'clock, I set a bowl of milk outside the door for Seag and went to bed.

It was my misfortune the next morning to meet Nadeen Kelly. She was in a green dress, her black hair tied back with a green ribbon, and a light in her blue eyes when she spotted me. She stepped out of the line of students sauntering along the campus walk and waited for me.

"Goodness," she said, "you might as well be dead for all I see of you."

A familiar emotion rose up in me. It was a surge that started somewhere under my heart and ended at my throat each time I saw her. I tried to keep it out of my eyes, for I simply could not afford to seem friendly with her.

It wasn't her fault, of course, that a Cohen had come into her family the generation before, but of all the staff members, she was most hated by Gartz. I had been quite friendly with her until Gartz had revealed this bit of genealogy, and, of course, had broken it off.

For the most part, I didn't think of her. But now and then her face would come between me and my class, or between me and sleep at night, and I ached to see her. There were so many things I wanted to tell her before asking the final question.

So I said, "Good morning, Miss Kelly."

Her eyes widened, blinked. "Such formality, James Hineman! Are you woolgathering?"

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to be rude. I'm in a hurry. Some last-minute details."

"I really beg your pardon," she said distantly. "I should not have presumed."

She swung away across the sleek lawn, and I stood for a moment or two looking after her while students swirled around me, chattering, wise-cracking, with never a glance for the young professor with an ache in his throat.

I felt a tug at my pants leg, then a small invisible form swarmed up to my shoulder.

"Are ye daft, lad?" Seag snarled in my ear. "She's like a fairy dance, and she's set her heart on ye."

"Go on with you," I muttered. "She'll have nothing to do with me now. Damn it!"

"And ye've set yer heart on her, 'tis plain to see. Go get her, lad, she's yours for th' takin'!"

I knew it was true, and I pulled up one bitter corner of my mouth. Mine for the taking. But I had a job, too. The performing of it involved millions of lives.

"I have a task set myself," I murmured, "and to that end my heart and bone and brain are bent."

As I said this, I was looking at the students filing toward the vine-clad buildings—slim-legged girls, lean young men, in gay scarves and sweaters

and disreputable trousers. But you know how a scene can blur before your eyes when they are focused on some inner thought. The broad green lawns, the school, the chattering youth, faded, and my voice must have been somewhat somnambulistic, for a voice in my ear said:

"Hineman! Are you ill?"

I whirled to see the skull visage of Gartz twisted in an expression of anxiety and suspicion. Thin lips parted in concern, but great dark eyes slitted.

"*Ulp!*" I said. "Sorry. I just remembered a quotation and had to repeat it so I wouldn't forget. An obscure poet—very obscure, Irish, I think—expressed a sentiment which applies to my present position."

"Present position!" Seag sneered into my other ear.

Gartz started, rolled his eyes here and there, fastened them on me for a long, uncomfortable minute, then walked away like a fretful zombi.

"Damn it!" I whispered at Seag. "You'll get me killed."

"It's ashamed of yer manners I am," his grim voice said. "Fillin' that colleen's eyes with tears. Ye'll apologize, or I'll make things hot."

"She wasn't crying."

"She is now," he said hotly. "Is it for nothing I can see through walls? Go eat humble pie, lad, like a gentleman."

"I shall as soon as my class is out. I'm late now. And for Heaven's sake, Seag, don't start anything."

Well, aside from an apparently inanimate piece of chalk dotting an "i" which I had neglected in an example on the blackboard, nothing happened during class. So I hurried into the department office after the bell, to get permission for leave, and ran into Nadeen.

Ran into. That's the accurate phrase. She was coming out, I was going in—papers all over the floor.

"That's two apologies I owe you," I said. I started to pick up the papers; and had to hurry like the devil to beat the invisible Seag to them. They leaped into my hands, and Nadeen wore a mystified look when I handed them to her.

She shook her head, as if to clear it, but didn't comment on the antics of her load. "Apologies?" she asked.

"Apologies," echoed an invisible voice.

"Apologies," I said quickly, and her wondering eyes shifted slowly to mine. "One for on the campus. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be curt."

"It's . . . all . . . right," she said vaguely. "Somebody left a note for you on my desk. And thank you for yours. It was sweet of you."

I note it forever to my credit that I didn't even blink.

"It was nothing," I said. "The only decent thing to do. You say there was a note for me?"

"I put it in your pigeonhole. I must go. Thanks again, Jimmie."

I watched her swing away down the hall while scraping sounds went on behind me. I turned to see an envelope make its way down the bank of correspondence boxes on the wall, across the room, and wave level with my knee.

"Stop that sort of thing!" I grated, as I took it and read:

HINEMAN: Stay away from Gartz, or it will be the worse for you. I know.

It wasn't signed. It was typewritten. I stuck it into my pocket and went into Gartz's office. He raised his funereal face from a small notebook on his desk. He snapped this shut and glared at me.

"Would I seem overly punctilious," he said heavily, "if I ask you to knock hereafter before entering my private office?"

"Sorry, professor." I was making more damned apologies, I thought. "I was thinking of something else."

"I trust it was important enough to justify your bursting through the door."

I made a conspiratorial whisper of, "The Cause."

"Hineman!" he snapped. He sat erect. Some color intruded into his waxen cheeks. He lowered his voice and spoke with deadly emphasis. "You will never refer to that subject in public again. You will make no changes in your way of life. This is highly important—more important, in fact, than you. We can do, and have done, without you. We cannot risk detection, however."

This was a departure from his attitude the night before, when he called the American people stupid cattle. But, I reflected, I had been mouthing his own catch phrases at the time. He didn't mind that, apparently. Well, he shouldn't mind this, either. Some other emotion was responsible for his choler. The notebook?

"I'm sorry," I managed to mumble.

He handed me an envelope. "Here is your permission. I have arranged for a substitute to conduct your class until you feel that your grandmother is out of danger."

"I'll keep you advised," I said.

Seag rode my shoulder home, but I didn't speak to him, not even when he tipped my hat to a perfectly strange old lady with a market basket. But when we were privately inside and I had a drink in my hand, I felt pretty grim.

"I want to talk to you, Seag."

He appeared on the couch across from me, his lower lip stubbornly outthrust.

"Did you write that note to me?" I demanded.

"That I did not."

"Do you know who did?"

"Mayhap."

"Who?"

"One who wishes you well, lad."

"Wishes me well, hell. One who'll get me killed. If you don't keep your fingers out of this situation, you'll be out of a job. I'm the last of the O'Briens. If I get bumped off, where would you go?"

"If ye'll drop the shameful business," he said, "ye'll be in no danger. But if ye persist in tryin' to overthrow th' governmint, ye deserve what ye get."

Again I couldn't talk. His hindrance was better than his help. If he had an inkling of what I was trying to do, he might rifle Gartz's personal effects and cause him to be exposed before I had the names of his highly secret organization. But if Seag only tried to stop me in what he thought was unpatriotic conduct, he still would do nothing calculated to harm me.

"Listen," I said, "will you do me a favor?"

"No!"

"It isn't much. I'm going away for a few days, and I want you to stay here. Come on, Seag. I'll buy you a toy cobbler's outfit."

This tempted him. He apparently had lost his tiny last and hammer, and was not equipped to mend any shoes which might be brought him by the little creatures he knew. His eyes lighted, and his mouth pursed.

"'Tis a bargain, lad."

Now I could breathe. I could think of the notes, now. Nadeen thanked me for one—whose? Possibly Seag had written it, and God only knew how far I was committed to what. I asked him if he had done it.

"Why," he evaded, "would I?"

"I don't know why you do lots of things. I feel that you're behind the note I received. Why, I don't know. I only know that you can get me in a jam that would chill your blood. And that's on the level."

"I don't wish ye harm, lad."

"It isn't what you wish; it's what you're doing blindly. I'm begging, now. Lay off."

"If ye say it," he agreed dubiously. "But ye'll suffer the consequences alone."

"Give me the chance. That's all I ask."

I must be vague. I don't know if Hineman's factory was assembling any device. If it was, I don't know what the device was. All I know for certain is that a set of plans was in his personal file, and I was supposed to steal them. I was on my own, too. If I were detected in the act, I should probably be shot. At least, that's what I was told.

I had help, of course. But not help that would arouse suspicion in even the keenest watcher. Hineman assumed that his office staff was bona fide, but one never knows, in wartime. So he couldn't be any more careless about leaving me alone in his office than he would with anyone else.

I knew where the plans were. I knew where he kept his key. So I came back day after day, watching for an opportunity. I received a new pass daily, and passed through the big gate under the same inspection accorded all visitors.

I was all the more careful because of the note I had received from—through?—Nadeen. Somebody suspected something. What or how much, I didn't know, but I must be careful.

During my visit, Seag did not manifest himself, and I assumed that he had kept his promise. Not that I trusted him. I couldn't afford to. My family history was full of ridiculous or ludicrous incidents that grew out of misplaced trust in the mischievous leprechaun. But I didn't believe that he could behave himself for two weeks, and assumed he was still at home.

Finally, my chance came. Hineman and I were in his office, chatting about our fictitious boyhood together. A siren blew, announcing an emergency in the shops. He raced away on an authentic errand, and not even the most suspicious eye could have found an ulterior motive in my remaining where I was. In the first place, I was not admitted to certain parts of the plant, and in any case I had no business out there in an emergency.

So I locked the doors, took Hineman's key from his desk, and slipped the envelope from his files to my brief case. I was back in my chair and had a cigarette going when he returned to report that the alarm had simply been a test.

I stood up and we shook hands below a significant exchange of glances. Presently, I was outside, in my car, packed, and on my way.

As I drove along, an urge developed in me to throw the whole thing over. Oh, sure, these plans were phony, and had no secret information, and would

probably pave the way to getting a list of the espionage ring I sought to dissolve. But now I should be forced to adopt the attitude of a good Nazi, to mouth the idiocies of a madman, to excoriate the Jews and extol the Aryans, whatever they were.

To the best of my knowledge, an Aryan, a true Aryan, that is, was a high-caste Hindu. It was still not clear to me how language roots had been twisted by Housepainter Schickelgruber to mean "master," "ruler," "superman," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. . .

And to mean the stocky, officious, murderous militaristic clique that dominated Japanese peasantry—a group that claimed as ancestors an entirely different set of gods from Hindu or Germanic.

Fanaticism, I thought, contrives wondrously with language. And now I am cast in the role of a fanatic, now that I have passed my first test. I must stiffen my arm in secret salute, must stand at reverent attention at the name of an historic liar, must class some of my best friends with dogs, until—.

Yes, until. Until I could expose these men and land them where they belonged. That thought allowed me to go on with it, the thought that I should make up to Nadeen and others for the indignities I should allow to be heaped upon me. That thought allowed me to call on Gartz at his home with a bland face and enthusiastic manner.

"My grandmother," I said when we were seated in his library, "made a full recovery. All is well."

Gartz began waving his long yellow hand in the air, much in the manner of Stokowski conducting a symphony. His attention was completely away from me. His dark eyes were glazed, and his thin lips drawn back from large teeth in the manner of a corpse that died in torture.

He began to sing.

He got to his feet, and with his eyes still fixed on far distances, began to march around the library table, singing in German. His tone was flat and automatic, and the words were unintelligible because of what seemed to be a thin and conflicting overtone.

I am afraid that I almost went to pieces. You have been in a dark room with—something? You knew you were alone, yet you were equally certain that a—a Presence watched, crouching unseen in the darkness. You remember the tiny hairs on the back of your neck, how they became rigid? How your shoulders contracted, how your stomach knotted? How an unuttered scream lay in your throat?

But this room was brilliant with light, and grating with sound as that skeletonlike figure marched, marched, around the table, conducting—something—with a clawed hand. I think I could take homicidal maniacs, lumbering idiots, paranoic killers, and even unseen horrors. But I couldn't take this.

You see, there was that thin overtone.

Clutching my brief case with one hand, my hat with the other, I left with about as much grace as a clothespin. I was scared, and I didn't care who knew it.

When I got home, I was still shuddering. Seag immediately appeared, a picture of smug satisfaction. His little face was agleam, his motions rapid and joyous.

"And did ye see Gartz, lad?" he inquired eagerly.

"I . . . saw him," I admitted.

Seag began to laugh. He tinkled. He rocked back and forth on his turned-up shoes. He slapped his thighs. He held his quivering belly with both hands.

"'Twas a master stroke," he gasped, and wiped tears on the corner of a table scarf.

I looked the inquiry, open-mouthed.

"Wanst I done a favor for a vam-

pire in Memphis," he explained between sputters of glee, "so now he done a favor for me. He called up a little demon—a needle's-eye kind of fellow, and made him crawl into . . . this is killin' me, lad! . . . crawl into Gartz's ear and sing the *'Horst Wessel'* song twinty-four hours of th' day. He's broke down four times in public, an' th' shiftless gossoon gets no sleep whatever."

"Damn it!" I snapped. "You promised to keep hands off until I've concluded my business."

"That I did not," he said with sudden dignity. "A leprechaun keeps his promises, as everyone knows. And ye'll never wring such a promise from me. I said I'd not accompany ye to th' factory, which I did not. I stayed here."

"And wrecked my plans," I muttered.

"Listen, lad," he said grimly. "Yer plottin' against yer country, and I won't stand for it. I made meself an oath to show you your error, and I'm devotin' my poor talents to th' task."

Again I was stymied. I couldn't tell him. So I kept quiet. So did Seag, and a heavy silence fell which was presently broken by the telephone.

A quiet, powerful voice gave me orders.

"You have an object which you wish to deliver to Professor Gartz," it said. "You will not do that. He will be removed because of evidences of mental aberrations which have focused undesirable public attention on him. You will instead attend a meeting."

He gave me the address, date, and time, and hung up. My satisfaction must have showed in my face as I replaced the receiver, for Seag gave me a long, puzzled stare.

As I drifted off to sleep later, I thought I heard paper rustling.

The place was a private room in a respectable restaurant. Dinner was served to four of us, shut away from the downstairs clatter of china and silver by a thick door. My companions were three ordinary men, none of whose voices resembled that of the man who had given me instructions the night before. During spasmic dinner conversation, I learned that he was also unknown by sight or name to these men who were merely district chairmen.

One was big and well dressed in pinstripe serge, giving the name of Bokar. The second was a stooped old man who smoked long black cigars and got ashes on his vest. The third had a slight Oriental cast to his features, so slight as to be almost unnoticeable. They were called, respectively, Brown and Jones.

"Now," said Bokar quietly, "let us have the plans. You are to be commended, Hineman, for your efficient work. Through no fault of your own, we three have been forced to reveal ourselves to you. I am sorry for you."

I guess I blinked a little. "Sorry?"

"You have not been with us long enough to be trusted so far."

He drew a pistol from his pocket. It had a silencer on it. Pointing it at me, he said quietly, "The plans."

"What . . . what *is* this?" I asked.

"The plans," he repeated.

"The plans!" whispered a fierce echo in my ear, and I felt Seag's hands on my shoulder. "Never mind, lad. I'll send thim to hell, too. Ye can get yer revenge then."

I say it honestly, I wasn't frightened. This was just plain old melodrama. How did they work it out in the movies? Sometimes the marines arrived, and sometimes the hero leaned back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and drawled:

"You're fools to kill me." And blew a cloud of smoke at the villain.

Bokar blinked and swept the smoke away with an impatient hand. "That is our affair."

"But the proprietor knows you're here. He'll give a description to the cops, and you'll be caught."

The little man called Jones sort of purred, "For edification of you, notice

window on dark alley. Will be dropping you there, and leaving here. Big crowd below will prevent notice as to whether you are with party, or have left early. Waiter will not come till we ring. No, we are safe."

Seag whispered again, so softly they didn't hear: "Give 'em th' plans, lad! 'Tis a gone goose you are, either way, and so it matters not."

I didn't blow any smoke this time. I dropped the burning cigarette on the tablecloth and stared at them, each in turn. Bokar's eyes were steady. Brown puffed on his long cigar. Jones smiled —almost.

"The plans," Bokar pressed.

"This," I said bitterly, "is what comes of having ancestors. You inherit things. For me, it was a leprechaun, and death. Damn you, there they are!" I flung the envelope on the table. "Little good they'll do you. At least I have that satisfaction."

"What do you mean?" Bokar snapped. To Jones: "Open them. If he has tricked us, perhaps he shall not die—so quickly."

Jones pulled papers from the envelope, and a look of bewilderment twisted his slightly Oriental features.

"This not making sense. This crazy."

I looked at the paper which he had spread on the table. It had diagrams, but they were not diagrams of a defense mechanism. They were pentacles, and triangles, and things you wouldn't be caught dead with. There was writing on this paper that somehow didn't look like paper at all.

Bokar snatched it up. His gun wavered away, and I began stealthily to edge out of my chair.

"It matters not, lad," Seag whispered. "Ye haven't time."

"Eo Besum," Bokar began, and read a short sentence aloud. Then the world caved in.

They told me later I was in the Abandon Ye ward. Bokar was a couple of spiked beds away, and beyond him were Brown, Jones, and Professor Gartz, each held flat on the pointed spikes with glowing iron bands, as I was.

Smocked attendants came and went along the aisles of beds. One was tall and lean, with nothing but a pair of ears where his head ought to be. This one wandered about, the long pointed ears twitching.

I shifted a shoulder blade off the point of a spike, and one of the ears pointed like a hunting dog, though the creature was twenty yards away. It snapped its fingers, and a small Thing with fur scurried to my bed with a tray of instruments in one of its sets of hands. The instruments were curiously shaped and gleaming—save one which was brown with rust. Rust?

It jabbed me with a long shining fork and I twitched. That was about all I could do. My vocal cords seemed inoperative, and the bands were so tight that I couldn't jump. But I twitched.

The Thing, which was mainly a large blue eye mounted on a nightmarish body, took a reading from the dial of the fork and did things to the band across my shoulders.

I shrieked. Not audibly, for I couldn't make a sound. I shrieked, though. I could tell by the feeling inside that it was a shriek.

It jabbed me again, but I didn't move. I couldn't. The bands were so tight I couldn't even flex a muscle. I could roll my eyes across the mirrored surface of the ceiling and thus see the whole ward, but nothing else.

The fact that I could see reflections in that ceiling was somehow worse than if my eyes had been taped shut. I had to look, and almost cried because I didn't own enough will power to shut my eyes against the horrors that scurried from bed to bed with sadistic speed.

Absolute silence.

Seconds, minutes, hours. The attendants made no sound, even when a new arrival was brought in and

strapped to a bed of spikes, nor when one of the occupants was wheeled through a door that opened onto luminous purple emptiness.

Nobody slept, and there was no way to measure time. The light source provided a steady illumination. The set of attendants were not relieved by others. The only activity was that of the attendants adjusting pinioning glowing bars, and the irregular arrival and departure of tenants.

Then Seag came, seeming not out of place in this chamber of freaks. He was accompanied by a black creature with a trifurcated tail and yellow eyes. They stopped at my bed. Three Tailtips made signals, and I was soundlessly released.

The pains drained out of me slowly, but soon I was able to walk across this sound-absorptive floor. As I reached the entrance door, I could not resist a smile of bitter triumph at Bokar, Brown, Jones, and Gartz.

Once in the corridor, which had a faint nauseous odor, my powers of speech returned.

"Somebody caught up with us," I said. "But who? Or is this a dream?"

"'Tis no dream, lad. Ye're in hell."

Three Tailtips turned his pentagonal face toward me. "And you could have *sold* that soul. Sucker." As I started to speak, "Shuddup!" he said.

We passed doors. Maybe I looked through them. I feel certain I must have, but I seem to have a mental block. I can't remember that I saw a thing.

I remember, though, the door at the end of the corridor had a sign on it.

RECEIVING

The letters glowed inside a painted mouth which framed the word with a huge, blobby smile of evil ecstasy.

We headed for this door, but I wanted no part of it. I stopped, fixed my eyes on that sign, and said:

"I'd rather go back where I was."

Three Tailtips sighed.

"Look, I'm busy," he said wearily. "As a special favor to Seag here, I'm running you in for a diagnosis without putting you through preliminary treatment. You're like a lot of clients I had when I was a sorcerer. Never

knew what they wanted. Now get in there, and shut up."

I looked again at the great obscene mouth which framed the sign, and quailed.

"I won't go through that door till I know what's going on. Why am I here? What will happen to me?"

"You've been told," Three Tailtips snapped. "This is hell. You're going to the diagnostician. He'll prescribe treatment. Then you'll be treated."

"But why? Am I dead?"

"Let me tell th' lad, Hooker," Seag broke in. "You never was much good at explai in', even before ye died." He looked up at me. "I returned th' plans, lad, and substituted an incantation which, when read aloud, would whisk everyone in th' room off to hell. I told you I'd show ye th' error of yer ways, and I have that. Ye turned against yer country, and ye'll suffer for't."

"Now inside," Three Tailtips said impatiently, and pushed me toward the door.

"I'll see ye later, lad—maybe," Seag said.

The instant I was inside what appeared to be an anteroom—similar to a doctor's or dentist's—a bedlam of screams from beyond the other door racketed against by eardrums.

"Oh, no! Oh, my God, not that, not that!"

This was reiterated, over and over, in a voice of such horrified despair that I turned to the door I had just entered. But it had no knob on the inside, and was locked. I was alone in the room with furniture so deceptively designed that the torture of sitting on it created a nerveless surprise. I leaped out of the first chair I tried and wavered on rubbery legs till the screams died away.

Presently a beautiful head poked through the door and said. "James Hineman? Please come in."

The head, with its riot of golden curls, was mounted on the body of a slender young man with hands as graceful as calla lilies. He sat behind a plain desk and waved me to a chair.

"Have a cigarette?"

I took it, and lowered myself into the chair gingerly. Then I relaxed, for this was the most comfortable seat I could remember. It was luxurious to the point of being sybaritic. All my nameless fears dropped away, and I smiled at this young man—man?—with the Praxiteles head.

He picked up a card from his desk. "I see you're a traitor to your country. How tremendously unusual. We haven't had an American traitor for Satan knows how long." He pursed his angelic mouth. "This requires thought. With most clients, a certain amount of latitude is permissible in prescribing a course of treatment. In your case, however, I should say that the treatment must be exact. Do you agree?"

I was comfortable. I had a sense of fatness. I waved the excellent cigarette. "Sounds logical."

"Good!" he enthused. "I'm glad you agree. Now I believe I have the very thing. Look!" He waved a hand at the wall.

A section of this became a screen on which, or through which, I saw myself.

It was a projection, apparently, of the "treatment" I was to receive. Yet I remained in this room and saw myself in another room. The factor which made it more than a projection was that I could feel what that observed identity felt, and see only what it could see.

I—the I that was on or beyond the screen—was in a room with no walls, ceiling, or floor. It was a room, nevertheless, soundproof and opaque. I was standing in the center of the nonexistent floor.

That much I could see. The rest, I felt. I felt an arm about my waist. Though I could look at myself, I could no more see my companion than that self which felt the presence which sent

shock after shock through my entire frame.

The arm around my waist. Hairy? Furry? Scaly? I don't know. It was an arm with the texture of obscenity and a certain rottenness.

I was frozen in the act of turning my head to identify my companion, and knew that I should forever be frozen so. I should never know what favored me with an eternal and evil embrace.

And yet I must know. Frozen thus, questioning screams bubbled up in my throat.

"Who are you? What do you want? *Who are you?*"

The scene faded. The screams died. Shaking, I faced the young man. He smiled gently, kindly, beautifully.

"Ingenious, don't you think? To have always the feeling that you are not alone, and yet never to be able surely to know, must closely approximate the sensations of a traitor as he goes about the streets of his country. He is never quite certain that he is unobserved, and this course I have prescribed for you adds refinement to that torture." He rose and beamed pleasantly. "So nice to have met you, Hineman. It's always a pleasure to meet someone who is unusual." He pressed a button on his desk and a couple of Things came into his office. "Take him away," said the young man. "Good luck, Hineman."

My vocal cords weren't working again. Not because of any compulsion, but because of fright. I was scared speechless as the attendants wrapped their hands about my arms and hustled me along a corridor to an immense inclosure which buzzed with orderly activity.

Behind a long rail at a fleet of desks, workers who had eyes and hands but no ears or mouths were busy making notations on file cards. Other workers filed these and brought cards when requested by an irascible, wrinkled being who was apparently the office manager.

He presided at a desk from which a long line of dejected "patients" stretched to the door. As each approached, the manager took his card from one of the two escorts which accompanied each patient, scanned the card, barked orders, and the patient was led—sometimes dragged—through a door in the opposite wall.

Seag came from somewhere and was beside me as I was rushed to the front of the line, receiving a grateful look from the wretch who was at its head. His torture was postponed. A little only, but that was something.

The manager fixed me with his eyes—which appeared to be protruding glass bulbs with inner lights—and snarled:

"Welcome! Gimme his card."

"One moment, your excellency," Seag interposed. "This one is under th' Treaty. And here is a note from the ould one himself."

Seag handed the creature a square of paper covered with cabalistic signs. This was scanned.

"Very well," snapped the manager. "Did you get his promise?"

"Divil a minnit have I had alone with him, yer honor."

"You're wasting my time, fool! Can't you see how rushed we are? Well? Get his promise, and take him out of here!"

My powers of speech began to come back. Had I heard correctly? "Take him out of here."

"Then I . . . I don't have to stay?"

"If ye'll promise, lad," Seag said, "to have no more to do with th' traitorous scum ye was dealin' with, ye can go and live out yer life. 'Tis a leave of absence, ye might say. When it's yer time to die, back ye'll come."

The "treatment" I had been shown came to mind. "Listen," I said in horror, "am I here only because you thought I was a traitor?"

"Thought, lad? Thought? Didn't I see th' plans with me own eyes? Didn't I take them back to th' factory, and substitute a spell? Thought?"

"But I was working *for* the government. The plans were phony. You little fool!"

Seag blinked. "What is it yer sayin', lad?"

"Say it over in a corner!" snarled the manager. "You're holding up the wheels of torture. If and when you settle anything, come back."

We adjourned, and I told Seag the whole story, and how my only purpose was to expose the espionage ring.

He put his tiny head in his hands and moaned. "Lad, lad! Why didn't ye tell me? Sure and I'd have helped ye. And now I've brought ye to hell, and they'll niver, niver, niver let ye go."

"But why not? I'm not guilty as charged."

"That's just it, lad. That's the kind they love to get. There's a hot time in hell every time some pore innocent lands here by mistake. Oh, lad, 'tis sorry I am, curse me for a thickhead."

"How come you were getting me out in the first place? Why am I privileged?"

"I was only scarin' ye, lad, hopin' ye'd give up yer evil ways an' honor yer country that has been so good to th' family. I got permission to take ye back, afther securin' yer promise to behave, but with th' understandin' that ye was only to stay long enough to have a son and heir. When yer son was born, ye was to be popped back to take yer punishment."

"Nobody needs to know that I won't be back."

Seag was horrified. "Don't even whisper treachery, lad! I gave me word, an' I must keep it. Ye've only a little while to live, no more than half a century more. But I've got forever, and if I broke my word, every second of it would be th' most horrible agony. No, ye've got to come back, but they won't let go if yer not guilty as a traitor. Be jabers if I know where to turn, lad."

"I've an idea," I said. "Mistaken identity. I'm listed here as James Hineman. Tell them the truth."

"'Twould only worsen the situation," Seag mourned. "On top of everything else, misrepresentation. No, there's nothing else for it, lad, but to take yer eternal punishment. It's heartbroken I am, and I'll share th' punishment with you. But I cannot do more."

He was really in a bad way, and I felt deeply touched that he would make the offer.

I shrugged. "If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. But there's no need for you to suffer, too, Seag. You did what you thought was right."

"But you're an O'Brien. Me place is by yer side. I'll stay." He led the way back to the manager's desk. "Yer honor, there's been a mistake."

Seag told the story, and the manager's glass eyes began to glow brighter. He pushed buttons, he dispatched messengers, announcing that an innocent had been captured and scheduling a celebration.

You could feel the tempo increase. Big things were being planned. A program of entertainment, and I wouldn't be in the audience.

I wondered suddenly what Nadeen was doing.

I remembered that somehow I had known, from the moment I saw that pile of potatoes in my living room—Seag's coming-to-stay present—that the family leprechaun would do me in.

But I hadn't bargained on going to hell.

The worst phase of the situation was that my job was unfinished. Four of the gang had been removed, true—Gartz, Bokar, Brown, and Jones—but there still remained the others, along with the big shot who had sent me to my death. They were unregistered, unsuspected, living as bona fide members of their communities, each with a single aim—to deliver America to her enemies.

Engrossed in such lugubrious thoughts, I hadn't noticed the hitch in the proceedings. I came to with a start. The manager was barking at me.

"What goes on here?" His voice was taking on a note of hysteria. "You hold up regular business until we'll have to work till all hours, and now I find you've already been here for five years. Somebody will pay for this!" he shrieked. He even jumped up and down a little.

It took a few seconds for the truth to sink in. Of course, the real James Hineman had died somewhere, probably at sea. Officially, he had simply dropped out of sight. He hadn't reached port from a sailing trip, and I had resembled him closely enough to take his name.

And now I was listed as James Hineman, as the manager let me know in bitter phrases.

"Just what are you trying to *do!*" he shouted. He waved at the guards. "Take the miserable, skulking, lying, cheating, idiotic, backward dog to his ward! Hold him until further notice."

One of the attendants tapped the card he held.

The manager glanced at it, and I began to fear that the filaments in his eyes would melt the whole room. I developed a new fear. I didn't know what this creature could do to me, but I was certain he'd do all he could. He shook in a paroxysm of rage until he gathered powers of speech. Then he spoke barely above a whisper, with his strange eyes burning into mine.

"I have maintained for centuries—centuries, do you understand, James Hineman?—the most efficient files known in the whole universe. More traffic goes through this department than any other in any galaxy. Not one single mistake has ever been detected here. Not one single mistake! Until now. Do you know what that means?"

His voice broke. His emotions seemed too great for words. He breathed heavily for a few seconds, then shouted at me.

"It means this! It means that the worst possible tortures which can be devised by the most ingenious intellects in this organization will be yours—forever and forever."

He motioned an attendant who had a desk to himself, and no visible occupation. The attendant came over leisurely.

"Dematerialize him and file him!" the manager said in a strangled voice. "We'll waste no more time on him—now."

The attendant faced me, and made a pass in the air.

Nothing happened.

He made another pass, and another. If he had had a face, I am sure I could have seen his bewilderment. As it was, I could feel it as he made gesture after futile gesture until the manager stopped him with a flick of his clawed hand.

"He's alive," the manager roared. He looked at Seag. "Get him out of here. Keep him out of here! If I ever see either of you again, you miserable little specimen, if you ever pull anything like this again, I'll see that you get a complete punishment, Treaty or no Treaty. Hear me?"

"Yes, yer honor," Seag said in subdued tones. "Come, lad. Hurry!"

I didn't need that suggestion.

Seag conducted me to a bare, circular room. In the center of this was a kind of altar, with a blue flame burning. Seag pulled a sheet of paper from his jerkin pocket, climbed up on my shoulder, and muttered rhythmic phrases as he fed the paper to the flame.

They had me. I was ringed in by grinning, misshapen faces. One of them threw a rock. Then another, and another. Each rock hit me in the right shoulder.

I opened my eyes. The waiter continued to shake me. I pulled away from his hands. He immediately dropped them, became courteous.

"You dropped off to sleep, sir, after your companions left. I thought it best to wake you."

The room was empty, save for the two of us. Dishes, utensils, platters of scraps showed that we had been there, Bokar, Brown, Jones, and I.

This had been a dream?

I blinked at the waiter. "When did they leave?"

He made a frown with his eyebrows. "I don't know, sir. I hardly see how it was possible. I was on duty. I don't see how they could have passed me. Somehow, they did."

I looked at my watch. According to it, I had come into this room an hour ago. Our dinner must have taken that long. Then, if I had slept and dreamed, it had taken no longer than ten minutes at the outside.

"How long have you had the door in sight?"

"For the past half-hour, at least," the waiter answered. "About ten minutes ago, all sound in here ceased. I waited, but it seemed unnatural, so I came in and found you alone."

I didn't want to think about it. Not yet. I gestured at the slip of paper in his hand. "I suppose I'm stuck for the check?"

He smiled. "I'm sorry, sir."

It was for six dollars and eight cents. I knew without looking that it might as well have been sixty, for I had exactly one dollar and eight-five cents, having bought a pack of cigarettes on my way to this rendezvous.

If I hadn't been fuddled with mixed thoughts and fears, I'd have given him my name and gone away. But I stalled for time.

"I'll have things to say when I see my friends again," I said jocularly. "Will you bring me a B. & B.? I'll have a drink before I go."

He went away, and I stared at the

empty table. They *had* been here.

"Seag!" I called softly.

He appeared, sat on the butt end of the unfinished loaf of French bread. "What's trouble, lad? Can't ye pay th' bill?"

"No."

He fished in the pocket of his jacket, came out with a tiny purse and tossed it to me.

"I'll niver be able to make up to ye for what I've done this day," he said. "But at least I can give ye riches."

I opened the purse. A shiny new dime lay in it. That was all. I took it, turned the purse wrong side out, shook it. But the dime was all.

"Is this a joke?"

"Close it, lad, and look again."

I did. Another dime was there. I repeated the operation.

"Ye can do it forever," Seag said, "and always find a coin. It's yours, though poor payment for what I've done to ye. Wurra, wurra, it's a thick head I am! It's dretful th' misery in me, lad."

I put the purse in my pocket, and gave Seag a long, steady look. "Tell me the truth, Seag. What really happened?"

"Just what seemed, bhoy. 'Twas all true as true."

I groaned. "Then I'm back where I started. You've done away with the only contacts I had. I'm lost. I suppose I really saw Gartz in—wherever I was."

"That ye did. He was murdhered by one of his own men this night, on order. 'Twas clear he was addled, an' they shot him an' burned his house, so that he could not give away secrets."

"Then I'll never get that list of names." I put my head in my hands. "Seag, Seag! I know you had my interests at heart, but you've messed things up beyond repair. The names of members of that group are much more important than the name of O'Brien."

He seemed about to cry. Then, suddenly, he brightened.

"Lad, lad!" He bounced to his feet. "Do ye mind th' day ye left for th' factory, when ye bust in on Gartz an' he was a-lookin' at a little book?"

I remembered.

"Sure, an' th' book has a list! Come, lad, mayhap 'tis what yer afther."

Seag disappeared. The door opened. The waiter entered with a small, fluted glass and a suspicious look. As he set the glass in front of me, his eyes darted about. He dropped his napkin, and shot a glance under the table when he picked it up. He slitted his eyes at me.

"What goes on here?" he demanded.

"—on here," said a voice from the corner.

The waiter spun as if he'd been stabbed. "What was that?" he barked.

"—that?"

"Echo," I explained. "I was talking to myself, and the echo made it sound as if somebody was in here with me."

"—with me," said the voice, and I began to grin, despite my various worries.

For the waiter wore a harried expression.

"There never was an echo in here before. What goes on here, doc? I've been in this room a hundred times, and I never heard no echo."

"Well, ye hear it now," said the voice.

The waiter began to edge toward the door. His eyes were wide now. One hand groped blindly toward the knob, the other cocked to meet emergencies.

"Wait," I said. "I'm a ventriloquist. I was throwing my voice."

He continued his crablike progress. "Don't gimme that. Nobody can throw his voice. He's got to divert attention, and make you think his voice is coming from somewhere else."

"But I can actually do it. Look here, do you want to be paid or not?"

That stopped him. He came back to the table. "Yeah, but hurry, will you, doc?"

I put a hand in my pocket. I put what change I had on the table. With the dimes I had taken from Seag's small purse, I had two dollars and ten cents. I had forgotten to prepare for this.

Fifty times I reached in my pocket and pulled a dime from the purse, closing it each time. The waiter watched me with a certain interest the first few times, then with impatience, then in anger, and finally he began to turn purple around the edges.

"I have to do it this way," I said. "I'm sorry."

He made a visible effort to control himself. Slowly and deliberately, he unclenched his hands and laid first one, then the other, on the edge of the table. He leaned toward me, letting his weight slowly onto his bent arms. He pressed his lips into a tense, tight line. He put his face close to mine. The cords in his neck were like taut cables.

"I don't care, see?" he said desperately. "You make three men disappear. You make voices. It's all right. You're not going to get under my skin any more. I don't care what you do. You can go up in a cloud of pink smoke, for all I give a damn. Just gimme my dough."

I finished automatically, paying him no more attention, for he had put his finger on the fact that would make everything work out all right. When Brown, Bokar, and Jones failed to report, the organization would investigate. When they found me alive, they would have questions to ask, and so I would be back in the fold.

Whether as prisoner or member was a moot point, but at least I should not lose touch.

The waiter snatched the pile of coins and marched out resolutely. I picked up my brief case, and felt Seag climb on my shoulder.

"Did those others die?" I asked him. "Will they be turning up again?"

"Niver fear," he said. "They're dead, all right, all right."

"Then how come I'm not? The spell worked the same on me with that exception."

"Sure, an' I was ridin' yer shoulder, lad. Ye'll come to no harm long as I'm here."

A university at night is a place of dismal and hallowed quiet. You walk along a path and feel as explorers must when they find a land of empty, austere temples: this place must have known youth and laughter, but not in the memory of man. You walk across an empty lawn under vacant windows, and are awed to think that this sleek greenery has known other, gayer feet.

And the night light over the entrance reminds you of a police station.

Perhaps my mission brought that picture to mind, for I tiptoed through the silent halls like a man who has just killed his grandmother with a shovel. I had a right there, but I think I can be excused for being a little jittery. I watched right and left, and over my shoulder, for the watchman.

I blessed the rule that allowed all professors to carry a key to their department office, and blessed old Dr. Jowp who was responsible for the rule. He had lost the only key to the math office several years before, and had broken his left leg just below the knee while trying to climb in a window.

I opened the door, switched on the light, and went into Gartz's private office. After all, I reflected with a return to normalcy, I had a right there, and it might as well look natural.

I felt Seag shinny down my leg and heard no more from him as I rifled through Gartz's files. I found everything from how to make gin with sugar alcohol to notes on a projected novel about whaling in the South Pacific, but no notebook.

"Look in th' desk, lad," Seag suggested.

The desk was locked. A steel letter opener in the center of his green blotter gave me an idea which, translated into action, forced the drawer with a

rending sound, and provoked a question from the doorway:

"What are you doing in here?"

"Hello, Nadeen," I said sheepishly. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw a light as I was going home, and was curious. "What," she repeated, "are you doing in—"

"Sit down, Nadeen. Close the door first. I want to talk to you."

Her eyes were a deep aquamarine blue, her hands fastened in the folds of her gray frock, and dark eyebrows made a caret under the part of that midnight hair. She obeyed.

"Just before I left," I said, "you delivered a note to me. Did you write it?"

Her gaze dropped to trim feet and ankles, came back to mine. "Yes."

"Why? What do you know about Gartz?"

Her eyes steadied, glinted a little. "I'm no fool, Jimmie. I don't know anything definite against Gartz, but I know where he stands as far as—"

"Stood," I corrected. "He's dead."

"Oh?" She frowned. "I hadn't heard. How do you—"

"No, I didn't kill him. But he's dead."

"Then it doesn't matter why I wrote you." She paused, then burst out, "But it does! If you're mixed up with his kind, you're very wrong, and I wish you'd stop it. Stirring up racial hatred, sneering at the government. Oh, sneering so delicately that you can't put a finger on anything, but sneering nonetheless. If you're doing that, I'd do anything in the world to stop you."

"Why?" I asked this hesitantly, and felt my heart zoom into high gear.

"As a matter of principle, for one thing," she said stoutly. "And well, er . . . oh, never mind."

But I had my answer, and grinned.

"Listen, darlin'."

Her mouth oohed, but compressed into a tiny smile.

"If I give you my solemn word, will you believe me?"

"Of course," she murmured.

"Then I tell you that I'm not mixed up with Gartz and his kind, that I am completely opposed to his ideas. I have never shared an opinion with him, really, except maybe as concerns intransitive verbs. Will you believe that, and will you run along home after I kiss you good night?"

I crossed the room to her, and she rose with an expression which said that I was out of line. But an expression never stopped an Irishman.

I don't suppose I stood looking after her very long by the clock, but it was long enough to build a quiet cottage in the country, and name two kids.

Then I closed my mouth and turned back to the desk. I felt that I hadn't really said too much to her. I'd put myself in a mess by being overly cautious with Seag, and I didn't want Nadeen dropping any monkey wrenches.

In this business, I reflected, you have to fight the people who are on your side as well as the enemy. Well, she was happy, now, and would stop worrying, and I really hadn't broken any rules. It was a good thing, though, that she and I were going out to ring wedding bells and dodge old shoes one of these days. She was smart, and could define an inference as well as the next one.

I found the notebook about halfway through the last thought, but didn't look inside till I had finished about the wedding bells and shoes. Then I opened the book and skimmed the couple of hundred names and addresses.

No classification indicated that these might be anything but names of personal friends. The addresses were scattered over the entire country, and were innocuous enough. Some were business addresses, others private.

But a surging emotion told me that here was the information the department had been seeking for several years. Here were the innocent-appearing agents, a widespread system of sharp

eyes and ears. And clever mouths spreading rumor and dissension here and sending facts to their fatherland, for a highly important part of such an agent's work is to spread disunity among the people.

America was now solidly all out in the war effort. But war is somewhat undramatic—away from home. For the vast majority of the population, war was a series of daily headlines. And, as time and the war dragged on, little seeds of doubt, planted by solid citizens such as these agents must appear to be, would grow and propagate. Then, come the day when war was in our own front yards, it would find a less-solid defense line than if the seeds had never been sown.

Incalculable harm, of course, could result from facts sent to the enemy by these agents. Maps of roads vital to defense, passes in mountain ranges through which airplanes could travel most efficiently, prices of foodstuff which indicate shortage or surplus, school enrollment changes, priority curves, the number of planes, cars, or trucks manufactured—anything and everything could possibly be converted into death for thousands.

Now, action. I had to get this list to Washington in a hurry. I had gone to hell and back for it, but it was worth the effort.

"Wheesht, lad!" came an excited whisper from Seag, and he was on my shoulder in an instant. "He's coming. The big bhoy himself!"

I faced the door. No footsteps—for perhaps ten seconds. And then only a faint scuff from the hall. This entered the outer office, came to the door opposite me. It opened, and the chief of the organization stood there.

Not that he looked like an executive. That spare, lean frame draped in haphazard clothes, those long narrow feet, the red stringy hands, the horsy face and sparse blond hair belonged on a farm. You could picture him whittling near the stove of the crossroads store, and spitting against its cherry stomach now and then, giving out cosmic truths with a flutter of Adam's apple.

His eyes, though, belied the bumpkin exterior. Have you ever seen a large eagle, recently caged? Its great eyes are the color of courage. Fierce and steady, calm with a knowledge of superiority.

He fixed his on me, and spoke in a voice that was so smooth as to be startling, coming from him. Some quality of his voice rang a bell in my memory, but I couldn't connect it with any experience. Somewhere, I had heard that voice.

"Good evening, James Hineman."

"I'm afraid," I said cautiously, "that you have the advantage, Mr. . . . uh—"

He waved this aside. "What are you doing here?"

"Some late work," I said: "I was just leaving."

"Good. I want to talk to you."

I had a decision to make. If, as Seag had said, he was the brains of the espionage ring, would his name necessarily be on the list in the notebook? If so, my work was done, and I must reach my chief as quickly as possible. But if anybody's name was missing from the list, his would be. And since I didn't know it, I couldn't take a chance on his getting away unidentified.

Even if he told me the name by which he was known, I decided, he might be listed under another.

All this reflection was wasted, for the decision was made for me. He put a hand in his jacket pocket. Lazily, naturally, to be sure, but the pocket bulged more than was natural.

"I am very anxious to talk with you," he repeated. "Shall we go to my house?"

"Why all the mystery?" I thought the question was justified, from the viewpoint of a college professor interrupted at work. "Who are you?"

"You have sufficient knowledge of

my identity," he said easily. "I talked with you by telephone, and instructed you to meet Bokar, Brown, and Jones at the Elite Restaurant. You did not keep the rendezvous. Why?"

"But I did."

"Ah?" He was silent for a couple of seconds, while those colorless eyes held mine. "Then I am most anxious for a talk. Shall we go?" He made a little movement with the hand in his pocket.

I walked a step ahead of him, at his request. "Should we chance to meet the watchman," he murmured, "I trust to your ingenuity to provide a reason for our being here."

We didn't meet the watchman. He directed me across the campus to the street where a long, low convertible snuggled against the curb.

"You will drive," he said. "Please drive at high speed. It is a conviction of mine that a man will not deliberately wreck a speeding car. Self-preservation, you know."

"You don't need a gun," I said. "I'm as anxious to talk to you as you are to me."

"Ah? Why?"

I had my story straight now. "Because something has apparently gone wrong. You obviously suspect that I haven't played square. So I want to know what's up."

He thought this over. "Very well. But you will drive at high speed, nevertheless."

He gave me an address in the neighboring town, and I pushed the big car along the gently wriggling highway between shadowy maples, between fresh-smelling fields of corn, clover, and alfalfa. Occasional farmhouses rushed out of the gloom and whirled away behind.

When the siren began to wail behind us, I lifted my foot from the accelerator and the compression roar boomed in my ears as the car slowed. He didn't prod me from behind, so I slowed to legal speed, and a motorcycle cop overhauled us. He motioned me to one side with a curt hand, and I stopped.

"What now?" I muttered from the side of my mouth.

"If he gives you a citation, accept it cheerfully."

The cop propped the motorcycle against a fence post. He pulled off one glove, took pencil and ticket pad from a pocket, glanced at our license, and sauntered over. He shined his flash in my eyes, and then in my companion's.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Larkin," said the cop. "What's the matter?"

"Howdy, officah," drawled my companion, and I placed him in my memory. His correct grammar had thrown me off. He now spoke in tones familiar to the nation. "Mighty afraid I'm apt to be late for m' pro-gram, officah. In a mite of a hurry."

"Sure, sure," said the cop. "Want a escort?"

"Reckon not, thankee. I 'spect we'll make it."

"O. K.," said the cop. "Don't guess anybody else'll stop you. I'm the only one in this neighborhood, I think." To me: "Well? Get goin'!"

I did, and my eyes were very wide. Not to see better, but to help me steer while I considered this new fact. George Larkin, world-famous radio commentator, whose folksy digs at this and that political group were almost as much quoted as those of the late Will Rogers.

I remembered a program of his I had caught, during the preceding week. He had not exactly criticized the administration's war effort, but he had gibed at certain obscure aspects. These comments had aroused, even in me, a certain doubt in the whole strategy.

What did they do to frank opponents?

This is the way nations are split, I thought. A word here, a word there, gentle hints that the hands on the helm are ever so faintly shaky. The greatest danger from such sources lay in their greatest charm—the kindly biting humor that so delights us.

The farmer, listening: "By jeepers, that's purty good!"

The businessman: "Hm-m-m. Some sense in that."

The laborer: "Yeah, and there's a lot of other things, buddy."

What should I do? I had no gun. I would cheerfully shoot such a man down, but this course was closed. Should I crash into a telephone pole at full speed? Both of us would probably die, and the notebook would eventually make its way to Washington.

But suppose the list was what it appeared—simply names and addresses of correspondents. And again, suppose that the crash set the car afire, and the notebook burned. Or that the crash threw Larkin clear, and he found it in my hip pocket.

No, a crash was not certain enough. I had to string along for a while, and watch my chance to kill him, or capture him.

Alone.

I realized with a sudden sense of loss that Seag was no longer on my shoulder. That slight pressure of his weight was gone. As long as he was on my shoulder, he had said, no harm would come to me.

Still, I could no nothing but obey the man who had a gun trained on the back of my neck. I parked in front of his big, dark house, and preceded him to the door. With one hand, he unlocked it and motioned me into the dark hall.

I never knew what hit me.

He slapped me behind the ear with his gun, I suppose, for when I recovered consciousness in what appeared to be a basement room, I was conscious of a knot on my skull, and pain. Larkin sat in a chair, looking down at me on the floor, and smiling with satisfaction at the cords around my hands and feet.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Sorry," he said, "to be forced into crude methods. But I am alone here, and I prefer talking to you while you are helpless, in the event that you prove dangerous. Understand, my dear Hineman, I am not at all sure that you will not be able to answer a few question satisfactorily. If so, you have my humble apologies. But events have not transpired tonight according to schedule. First, what happened to Bokar, Brown, and Jones?"

"I gave them the plans," I said glibly, "and they went away."

His eyebrows rose. "You're lying," he said pleasantly.

"Call the restaurant," I challenged. "The waiter will remember."

"I shall," he said, and left.

I saw that he had the notebook I had taken from Gartz's desk. On his way to the door, he stopped, considered the little book, then went to the fireplace in the far wall.

"I am very happy that you found this," he said. "If Gartz hadn't lost his mind, he'd never have left it in his desk. Well, we don't need it. I have other means of keeping in touch."

He tossed the book into the fire, and I wished it had been my right leg instead. He nodded at me, and went up the steps.

So, I thought bitterly, here I am again. The list is destroyed, and I have no point of contact except Larkin. God knows what will come out of this situation. Where in the devil is Seag?

A heavy, unnatural blackness began to steal over me. This increased, numbing my extremities, then enveloping me completely so that I seemed to be locked in a vacuum. I could hear, see, feel nothing.

The veil lifted as Larkin re-entered. He wore a pleasant smile.

"I owe you an apology, Hineman. The waiter confirmed your story, although I saw no reason for his profanity. One moment, and I'll release you."

He went to a tall cabinet, opened it. He pushed the rear wall, and it pivoted to reveal what seemed to be a compact radio set.

"This transmitter," he explained,

"operates on a fixed frequency. Receivers all over the nation are tuned to it twenty-four hours a day. We use it only in emergency, and never very long at a time. It is not likely to be traced."

He did things to switches, cut in humming generators, adjusted rheostats, and spoke into a microphone.

"Attention!" he said. He repeated this, and waited about ten seconds. Then, *"Heil!* Three traitors, Bokar, Brown, and Jones. Watch for them. Here are their descriptions." He gave an amazingly detailed picture of each. "One of these carries vital information, a plan of the instrument we have been seeking. Make certain that each does not have it on his person before destroying the body. *Das ist alles. Heil!"*

He turned off the transmitter, then crossed to me. "I'm very sorry, Hineman. I apologize for the indignity. But we cannot run risks. You understand."

"Certainly. Well, you're a cinch to catch up with those men some day."

"Soon," he said confidently.

"I hope so," I replied, and meant it.

He bent to untie my bonds, stiffened in the act, put down a hand, and pulled a yellow slip of paper from the breast pocket of my coat.

"I thought I searched you thoroughly. How did I overlook this?"

He opened a telegraph blank. He read it. His face froze. His colorless eyes bored into mine.

"So," he said thickly. "So! You're a harmless little college professor who wants to help the Reich! How do you explain this?"

Even without looking at it, I couldn't explain it. I hadn't had a telegram in my pocket. Seag again, I supposed bitterly as I read it.

CONGRATULATIONS ON LIST. CLOSING IN MIDNIGHT MONDAY. WONDERFUL WORK. G2

"I never saw it before," I protested. He didn't smile. You'd have expected him to, with me tied helpless. But he didn't. He looked at me for what seemed like a year. Then, "I'll deal with you presently," he said, and turned back to the radio.

"Attention!" he snapped. "Attention. Each of you will prepare to assume your emergency identity at once. Close your present affairs instantly. Do not trouble with loose ends. You will go to the place where you have established another name, and settle there. Here is a telegram which has just been issued by military intelligence. Before I read it, let me warn you that you have only an hour at most, depending on the time belt in which you live. Here is the message."

I didn't hear him read it, for the strange, thick veil settled over me again. When it lifted, Larkin was seated before the radio in an attitude of deep contemplation.

A whisper sounded in my ear.

"Speak to him, lad."

I cleared my throat. Larkin turned. His eyes widened slightly in surprise.

This was a different man from he who had taunted me. His long face bore an expression of ineffable kindness. His eyes were mellow with good feeling, and his movements were slow and deliberate.

He rose to his feet, murmured a phrase of gibberish in that dulcet voice, and hurriedly untied me. He brushed dust from me with tender hands, and helped me to the chair he had occupied a few minutes earlier. Then he squatted cross-legged at my feet and smiled.

"***_____?" he said.

It might as well have been that. It made no sense to me.

"I can't understand you," I told him.

A look of bland sadness spread over his face. He resembled a nice horse.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"***____***____," he said gently.

I spread my hands helplessly. "What goes on here, Seag?" I asked the air.

"Go away, lad," came the whisper. "Everything's all right."

I rose. So did Larki — I bowed. He bowed. As he did, his arm brushed against his jacket pocket. He investigated, took out his gun, and looked at it with a puzzled frown.

I held out my hand. With a delighted smile, he laid the gun in it. His eyebrows asked a question.

"Look," I said. I aimed at the microphone, riddled it and the radio transmitter.

"———!!!" Larkin exclaimed.

"That's right," I said, and took off.

When I was outside: "What the hell?" I asked Seag, who was riding my shoulder again.

"He's a true Aryan now, lad."

"Huh?"

"Sure, an' I put a spell on th' message. He speaks and understands nothing but ancient Hindustani, and can niver, niver learn another language. None but a Sanskrit scholar can speak with him."

I said a lot of pretty things to Seag, and I laughed some as we drove away in Larkin's car.

"But what about the others?" I asked. "He destroyed the list."

"Sure, an' they're in the same fix, lad. Whoever heard th' message. They're true Aryans, as yer books define 'em, which they claimed to be all th' time. Ye can inform yer boss th' job is done."

Well, I could make a report, all right. But somebody was going to have to accept my word. I had plenty of proof, but I couldn't explain it to somebody else. Hell, I couldn't explain it to myself.

"Thanks, Seag," I said.

"I'm not really supposed to do things like that, lad, like usin' spells, and layin' th' Silence on ye whilst I slipped th' spell in yer pocket an' whilst it was read. Wanst a banshee I palled around with durin' off hours used magic, an' th' powers took him off his train. 'Twas th' Limited, an' he was near heartbroken, but he's on an air-raid siren now, an' happy again. What I'm gettin' at, though, is that I'm leavin' ye, lad."

"Leaving?" Funny, I thought, how quickly I'd accustomed myself to having him around. The house would seem empty.

"It's weepin' I am, lad, but I got to report. Mayhap they'll deal fearsome with me for usin' magic. If I don't see ye again, lad, good-by."

He was gone, and I was lonesome. I took care of my business first, and then I did something about my loneliness.

It seemed a long time, but in reality it was only a month before the little cottage was built and Nadeen and I went out to move in.

"Mrs. Michael O'Brien," she said. "I can't get used to it. I'll probably call you Jimmy for months. You don't mind, do you?"

I guess you know what I said.

"Ever since I wrote you that note," she went on softly, "I knew it would end this way. Will you not laugh if I tell you something?"

I took my cue.

"Well, it was the strangest thing. All of a sudden, I felt as if I was the only thing in the world. I couldn't see or hear a thing. And then a voice seemed to come to me, telling me what to write. Then, when I could see and hear again, there was the note in my typewriter. Do you think I'm nuts?"

I made a muffled noise, for we were at the threshold, and she was in my arms. I carried her across.

"Welcome home," I said.

She didn't answer. She was looking at something beyond the door of the little hallway. I looked.

Smack in the middle of the floor was a large pile of onions.

I put her down. "Listen, darlin', there's something I'd better tell you."

THE END.

The Wishes We Make

by E. M. Hull

He had been given a death sentence he knew about by the law. But there was a manner-of-death sentence the fates had given—and he had six wishes to use to escape both sentences!

Illustrated by Hall

"—I therefore sentence you, William Kennijahn—two months from this date—to be hanged by the neck until such time as you are dead. May God have mercy on your soul."

For a month and three weeks now, Kennijahn had poured an almost unceasing stream of vituperation at the walls of the death cell, at any turnkeys who came near him, at the judge who had delivered the sentence, at the whole human race.

"You've run into one of those miserable periods," his lawyer, Clissold, told him, "when the people are on a moral warpath. The bare suggestion of commutation made in the press the other day brought a thousand howling letters about a law for the rich and a law for the poor. It's unfortunate that the State proved so conclusively that you murdered your partner, Harmsworth, when he threatened to expose that stock swindle."

The lawyer shrugged hopelessly. "Ive been offering money right and left, vainly. And when a politician is cold to money, it's like the end of the world. Frankly, Bill, you're sunk. I'll keep on going to the last hour, but there's an inevitability about it all now that's—final." He stood up, finished, "I don't think I'll come to see you again unless I have something to report. Good-by."

Kennijahn was only dimly aware of the tall, thin figure being escorted out. Nine days, he was thinking, nine short days!

His mind twisted off into a contorted fury of horrible anger. When the very passion of emotion wearied him, he looked up—and the creature was standing before him.

The figure regarded him intently from its one gleaming red eye, its fantastic, black body twisted curiously as if that half-human shape was but a part of its form, the remaining portion being somehow out of sight.

Kennijahn blinked at it. He was not

afraid, only astounded. He expected it to go away if he shut and opened his eyes rapidly. For a moment, he thought of it as a mind distortion that had somehow synchronized into his vision.

After a moment, however, it was still there. Amazingly, then, it said:

"Oh! You didn't call me purposely. You don't know the method. Very well—have your wishes, and release me."

Kennijahn's mind was away in the rear. "Call you!" he said. *"Call you!"*

A spasm of horror jerked him erect on his bunk. "Get away from me," he yelled. "What in hell's name are you? What—"

He stopped, horror fading before the matter-of-fact way the creature was regarding him. "Certainly, you called me," it said. "You shaped a thought pattern—apparently, you don't know what it was or how to do it again. But it created a strain in space, and plummetted me into your presence. By the ancient Hyemetic law, I must give you your wishes, whereupon I will be released to return whence I came."

For a long second, Kennijahn's mind held hard on the idea of the thought pattern that could have produced such a monstrosity. He shivered a little with memory of his deadly fury, but nothing came clear.

He gave it up, and, because his mind was basically quick on the uptake, his own black destiny receded fractionally from the forefront of his thoughts, yielded to the tremendous meaning of one word:

"Wishes!" he said. "You mean—I can wish?"

"One is the principle," said the monster, "two is the word. The monad is Bohas; the duad is Jakin. The triad is formed by union, which is doubled by ignorance, to become a sesad."

The thing finished: "Six wishes."

"Six wishes?" Kennijahn echoed, his voice sounding crazily queer in his own ears. He almost whispered: "About—anything?"

"Within the limits set by the Fates, of course. So have your wishes and—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Kennijahn put up his hand as if he would ward off the words. "You're not doing this because you want to do it. You have to."

The thing nodded a little curtly. "Have to."

"You're a demon?" Kennijahn spoke with a gathering interest.

"I'm a Drdr."

"A what?" The thing only looked at him. Kennijahn went on, "You say, take my wishes. Do you mean I've got to take six wishes all at once?"

The Drdr looked almost sullen. "No."

"It makes no difference how long I take?"

"No difference. But if you hurry, I can return whence I came."

"Thanks for the information." Kennijahn spoke dryly. Then he frowned. He said sharply, "What do you mean, limits set by the Fates?"

"Your destiny cannot be changed."

Some of the high hope trickled out of Kennijahn. "Destiny?" he echoed hollowly.

"Every man," said the creature, "has his predestined fate. It is inexorable, and in your case the situation is that wishes will do you no good. You are doomed to die by hanging."

Kennijahn took the tremendous shock of the words with scarcely more than a shudder. He said incredulously:

"Suppose I were to wish myself in Buenos Aires, a prosperous-looking American businessman from the States. You mean to tell me that I will hang here in this prison next week regardless?"

"Not necessarily here, or next week. Is that your first wish?"

"You can actually do it?"

The great, blazing eye stared at him unwinkingly; and suddenly the ultimate thrill of this opportunity came to Kennijahn, that this was real, no nightmare, no phantasmagoria, nothing but wondrous truth. Six wishes! Good God,

sis! Why, with six wishes he could grab the whole earth. And what did it matter if a hundred years hence his destiny caught up with him.

First of all, then, get out of this hell hole. And to where else but Buenos Aires, where he had salted away money under the name of Peter Claremont? He had almost escaped there before after that ruinous fight with that fool, Harmsworth. But now—

"Let's go!" he cried wildly. "Get me out of here . . . out of here—"

There was blackness.

"The *señor* has his papers?"

The polite voice of the bank clerk sounded like a knell of doom. Kennijahn looked across the shiny desk at the dark, oily face of the clerk.

"Papers!" He attempted a smile. "Oh, you mean you want my signature, so that you can compare with the one I have on file?"

"No, *señor.*" The man was firm. "Your passports and documents relating to entry into the Argentine. The government regulations have become very strict since the war."

"Oh, yes, the war." In truth he had almost forgotten. Kennijahn finished clumsily, "At my hotel, of course. I shall go and get them."

"If you will be so kind, *señor.*"

It was hotter out in the street, a dense, suffocating heat that grew as the morning lengthened. Kennijahn thought furiously: Damned if he'd waste a wish on getting out of this silly jam. After all, he had his false papers. Or rather, Nina had them. He'd cable her, and she could take a Pan-American plane—and be here in whatever short time it took. She had her papers, too, so—

He thought about Nina with a rising excitement. Thank God, the police had never found out about her.

The cable was off before another thought occurred to him. He phoned the bank, and asked for the clerk who had served him.

"This is Peter Claremont speaking."

"*Si, Señor* Claremont."

"When I arrived back at my hotel, I found some urgent business awaiting my attention. I shall come in to see you tomorrow or the day after."

"*Si, señor.*"

Kennijahn hung up with a complacent smile. Nothing like gathering up all the threads.

The wire from Nina that came two hours later said:

ARRIVING THURSDAY. IF I DO NOT HEAR FROM YOU TO CONTRARY WILL EXPECT YOU MEET ME AT AIRPORT.

The only thing wrong with that was that he spent the next two nights in the main jailhouse. The officers who had come to the hotel to arrest him were polite and cold:

"You are to be held, *señor,* for the American police who, it seems, intercepted a telegram from you to your *señora.*"

So that was that, Kennijahn thought grayly. It was all perfectly natural; and the mistake was his in assuming that the reason the police had never mentioned Nina was because they didn't know about her.

His impulse the moment he was behind bars was to call Drdr, but he decided against that. His next wish was going to be PLANNED; and his best bet by far was to make a dramatic disappearance from the plane taking him back to America.

The roar of the big plane was a soft throb against the background of Kennijahn's thoughts. He could see dark splotches of forest below, dimly visible in the bright moonlight. At last, far ahead, a vast brightness showed.

The ocean gleamed and sparkled. The moon made a path of dazzling light toward an horizon that, at this height, was so remote that it seemed an infinite distance away. Kennijahn said in a low tone:

"Drdr."

He started in spite of himself as the black caricature of human shape jerked into sight beside him. The enormous single eye of the creature peered at him, a scant two feet from his own face. The thing said:

"Do not worry about your guards. They can neither see me, nor hear any conversation between us. You desire your second wish?"

Kennijahn nodded, a little numbly. The chill of that abrupt materialization was still upon him, and he felt amazed that even his pre-knowledge hadn't helped him. There was something about the monstrous little devil-thing that did things to his insides; and knowledge that it was harmless made no difference. He shook himself finally and said:

"I want to find out the exact limitations of a wish. When I arrived in Buenos Aires, I found myself on the street with five hundred dollars in my pocket. Is that your idea of how much a prosperous businessman would be carrying?

"But never mind that. What I want to know is this: Suppose I had said to you: Put me into Buenos Aires in a swanky hotel suite, with all my papers for entry into the Argentine on me, and a million dollars in a trunk—would all that have been one wish?"

"I can only give you about seven hundred thousand dollars," was the flat-voiced reply. "A set value was fixed by universal law long ago; I can only transpose it into your type of wealth."

"All right, all right, seven hundred thousand dollars," Kennijahn said testily. And then he stopped. His brain shook. "Good God!" he gasped. "Anything that I can think of at one time is *one* wish."

The creature nodded. "Within the limits set by the Fates, as I have said. Is your second wish, then, to go back to Buenos Aires as you described?"

"To hell with that. I don't want to live in no damned foreign country. I'm an American; and I've got a better idea. You said any wish—*anything!*"

"Within the limits—" began the thing, but Kennijahn interrupted brutally:

"Can you put me back into the past before the murder took place?"

He grinned at the jet-black monstrosity. "See what I'm getting at: No swindle, no murder, no destiny?"

"No one," came the calm reply, "can escape his destiny."

Kennijahn made an impatient chut of sound with his tongue. "But you can do what I want?" he said.

The thing's hideous mouth made a sullen moue. "Can, but would prefer not to. Because Drdr cannot go back to give you wishes *in* the past. Before you could have third wish, you would have to return to period after you called Drdr. And if you should get into trouble—"

"Trouble!" Kennijahn echoed. "Listen, I'm going to live the life of an angel." He paused, frowning. "But I see your point. It wouldn't do to go too far back. And that's all right. I didn't really begin to get involved financially until five months ago; and it all happened so damned fast—. Make it six months. There wasn't a cloud on the horizon six months ago. So shoot me back into time—"

The next second he was in the death cell.

Kennijahn stared around him with a gathering horror. The gray walls seemed to close in on him. The bunk felt hard and uncomfortable underneath him.

Beyond the doors, electric lights glowed dimly, but the cell itself was in darkness. It took nearly a minute before he made out Drdr sitting on the floor in one corner.

Simultaneously, the thing's great, blazing eye, which must have been closed, opened and regarded him redly.

A black rage twisted through Kennijahn. "You scum," he roared. "What the devil have you done?"

The red eye glowed at him expressionlessly out of the darkness, and unnatural sphere of light. The thing's voice said unhurriedly:

"Gave you your second wish, naturally."

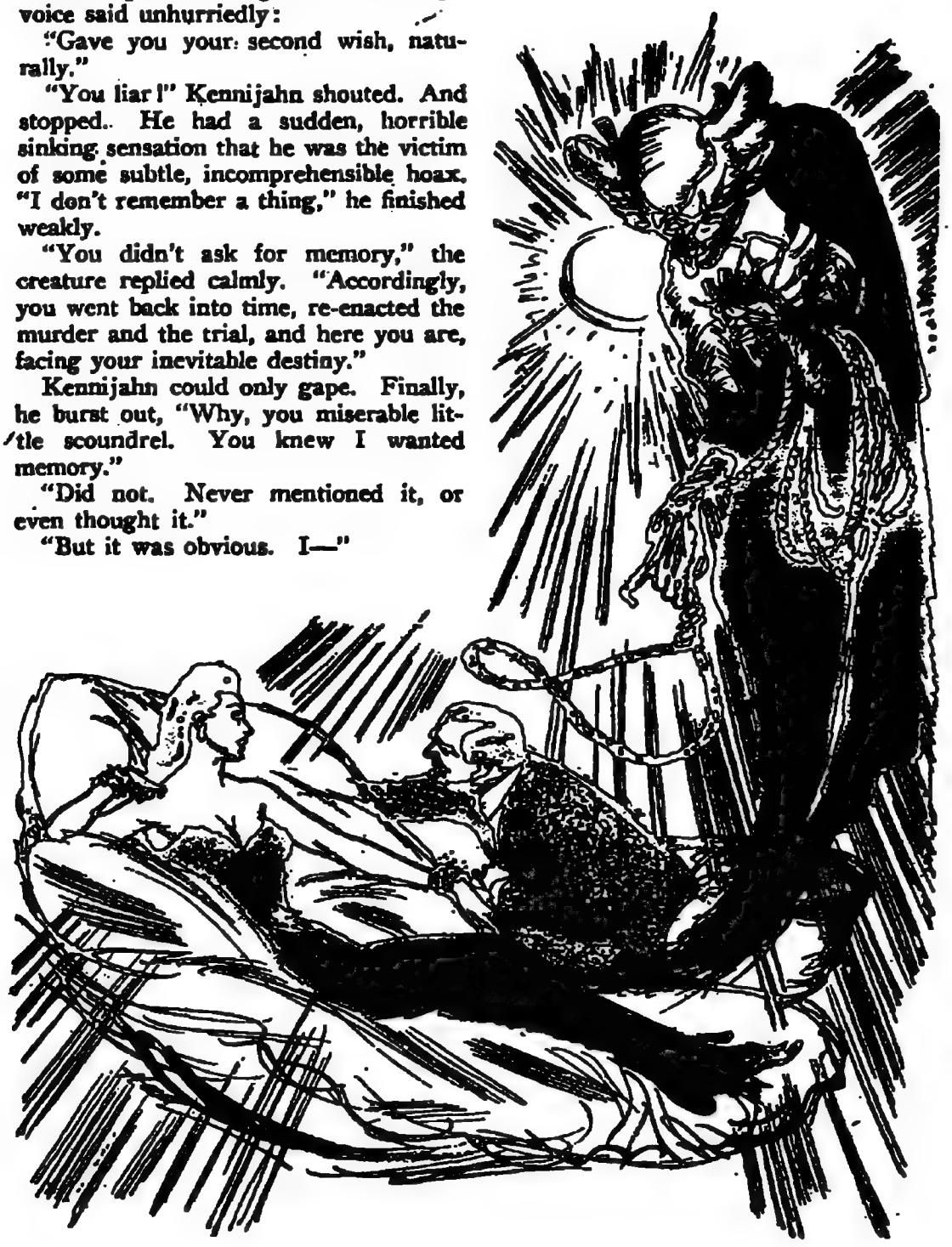
"You liar!" Kennijahn shouted. And stopped. He had a sudden, horrible sinking sensation that he was the victim of some subtle, incomprehensible hoax. "I don't remember a thing," he finished weakly.

"You didn't ask for memory," the creature replied calmly. "Accordingly, you went back into time, re-enacted the murder and the trial, and here you are, facing your inevitable destiny."

Kennijahn could only gape. Finally, he burst out, "Why, you miserable little scoundrel. You knew I wanted memory."

"Did not. Never mentioned it, or even thought it."

"But it was obvious. I—"



The monstrosity was staring at him. "I tell you and give you everything you ask me. Nothing more. And the sooner you have your wishes, the quicker I can return whence I came."

Kennijahn caught his fury into a tight, grim thought. So that was it. He had been so intent on his own problem that he had dismissed too readily the fact that the creature also had a purpose. He said roughly:

"Where did you come from, anyway, that you're so anxious to get back?"

Drdr was placid: "Is that question a wish?"

"No, of course not." Kennijahn spoke hastily. But his rage was cooling rapidly. With thoughtful eyes, he studied the shadow shape in the darkness on the floor. He'd have to watch out, plan more carefully, leave no loopholes.

"So I did it all over again a second time?" he said slowly. "In other words, my character got me into the same mess. That settles it. Change my character. Put me back six months, *with memory*, but in addition, make me more honest, strong, mind you, and—"

He thought of Nina; he added: "No nonsense about women, of course. I want no change in my outlook there. Is that clear?"

"I don't understand." The creature sounded puzzled. "Change your character. You mean, give you a different body, perhaps better looking?"

"No, my character!" said Kennijahn. He paused helplessly. It struck him suddenly that this creature had marked limits of understanding. "You know—my character. Me!"

"You! Change the essence that is you. Why, that is impossible. You are you, a definite pattern in the universe, with an assigned role. You cannot be different. The Fates made you as you are."

Kennijahn shrugged impatiently. "O. K. I get it. I am what I am. Perhaps, it's just as well. After all, I know my situation. If I was different, I might develop some screwy religious notion about accepting my fate. I guess I can handle this best as myself.

"All right, then, put me back six months with complete memory of you. Get that—and wait! This *is* only my third wish. You didn't put anything over on me that I can't remember?"

"This is your third wish," agreed the thing. "After this, you will have three more. But I warn you. I cannot help you in the past and—"

"Let's go!" said Kennijahn curtly.

When he woke up, he was sitting at his desk in his private office.

A brilliant sun touched the edge of the great window behind him; but he was still too taut, too cold from his brief sojourn in the death cell. Besides, there were things he had to be sure of.

He went to the door leading to the outer office, opened it, and said to the nearest clerk, a girl, "What day is it . . . what date?"

"July 7th, Wednesday," said the girl.

He was so intent that he forgot to thank her. He closed the door, his mind narrowed in calculation; slowly, then, he brightened. It was true. Six months to the day.

He sat down before his desk, and picked up the cradle phone. A moment later, the familiar voice was sounding in his ear.

"'Lo, Nina," he said; then, "Nina, will you marry me?"

"The devil!" Nina's voice came. "Have you gone crazy?"

Kennijahn grinned. He pictured the lithe, svelte Nina stretched out slinkily on her living-room chesterfield, her mind narrowed around the idea that he was trying to get a rise out of her. Trust Nina not to go out on a limb.

"I mean it," said Kennijahn. "I'm thinking of retiring to a country estate—within half an hour's drive of town, of course," he added hastily as swift memory came of Nina's utter boredom the time he had taken her to a mountain resort. He went on, "We'll raise a cou-

ple of kids, and live a merry life generally."

Her laughter trilled on the phone. "Kids—you! Don't make me laugh. Besides, I'm not the mother type."

"O. K., we'll skip the kids. How about it?"

The woman laughed her trilling laugh. "My dear," she said, "you bring around the most expensive engagement ring tonight, and I'll begin to believe you."

"It's a deal," said Kennijahn. "Goodby, dear."

He hung up, smiling. That was the first break from character. Next—

He stood up, opened the connecting door between his office and Harmsworth's and—

It was the sight of the man sitting there alive that did it. Kennijahn swayed. Then he licked dry lips. Finally, with a terrible effort, he caught himself, and stood there blinking at the man he had once murdered.

God, he thought, this business was enough to give anybody the creeps. He managed to say finally, "Hello, Andy." And was himself again.

Swiftly, then, he made his demand.

"But you can't draw out now," Harmsworth gasped, when Kennijahn had finished.

The man's thin face was flushed. He looked, Kennijahn thought annoyed, on the verge of becoming vastly excited. The other blazed on:

"Why, if you pull out without apparent reason, people will think it strange, think that you're getting out from under before a crash. You've got a reputation for that, you know. Damn it, how did I ever get mixed up with a shyster like you?"

He was beet-red now. He fumbled at a drawer. His hand came out, holding a revolver; his voice shrilled, "I won't let you do this; I won't, do you hear?"

Kennijahn ignored the revolver. After all, he thought coolly, a man who was born to be hanged wasn't going to be killed by a bullet from a chap who was scheduled to be murdered. It—

With a vicious amazement, he cut the thought off. What the devil was he thinking, he whose whole present existence was based on the conviction that destiny was not inevitable?

Abruptly, he was startled by the rapid turn of events. He said hurriedly:

"Put away that gun, you fool, before you hurt somebody."

"I want your promise," Harmsworth said wildly, "that you'll give me at least six months to get our customers used to the idea of your leaving."

Six months! Why, that would take him deep into the period where—formerly—the murder and the trial had taken place. "Nothing doing," said Kennijahn flatly. "I'm making a complete break now, this week—"

The first shot struck the door jamb behind Kennijahn. And then, he had bounced in, grabbing at the revolver, roaring in his bass voice:

"You idiot. I'll—"

The second shot came, as he twisted the revolver free from the other's fingers. Gun in hand, he stepped back. He felt a vague amazement and horror, as Harmsworth fell like a log to the floor, and lay there. Even more vaguely, he was aware that a door had flung open, and that a girl was standing there, her mouth opening and shutting, making sounds.

Then the door slammed. He heard a frantic dialing; and then a high-pitched girl's voice screaming something about police.

With a gasp, Kennijahn dropped the gun, and sank into a chair. For a moment, he sat taut and cold. Finally, the realization penetrated that the police were due in minutes. Instantly, his mind cleared. He snatched the phone on Harmsworth's desk, dialed Clissold's number, and described tersely to the lawyer what had happened.

Clissold said in his barking voice,

"Bill, frankly I don't think that's such a good story. You retiring at thirty-eight. Who else knew about your decision?"

"For heavens' sake!" Kennijahn rasped. "Does anybody have to know? It's a common-enough decision, isn't it?"

"Not for you, Bill. Don't take this personal, but you have a reputation for grabbing all you can get. I repeat, did anybody know you had decided to retire?"

Kennijahn thought of Nina, and a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. "Only Nina," he said finally, heavily.

"Worthless," said Clissold succinctly. "We'll have to change that story, Bill."

"Look here," Kennijahn began. "Are you trying to tell me—"

"I'm not trying anything," the lawyer barked. "But now what about that stenographer who barged in while you were still struggling with Harmsworth—what did she see?"

"How the devil do I know?" Kennijahn groaned. He felt suddenly hopeless. It was the swiftnes of it that brought the paralyzing realization of how this thing might be twisted against him. He snapped, "Clissold, get over here, and shut that girl up, and make her think she saw what we want."

"Now, don't get excited," the lawyer's voice soothed. "I'm just checking up all the angles. After all, the big thing in your favor is that it's Harmsworth's gun."

"Eh!" said Kennijahn, and his brain twisted crazily into depths.

He had a mind's-eye picture of himself explaining why he had turned his gun over to Harmsworth more than a year before, because the coward was an alarmist who was always seeing bandits stalking into the office. It was such a natural thing for a man of Kennijahn's size and physical confidence to hand over a gun that—that no one would ever believe it.

And six months would have to pass before he could get in touch with Drdr. Six months of days and hours and minutes and seconds, six months of warding off the rope, six months of—hell.

There were black days when he thought it couldn't be done. The trial court reached the point where it denied further stays, and rejected motions based on technicalities. And then the court of first appeal had a small agenda, and took his appeal in four days straight within a month of his first conviction.

Finally, the supreme court of the United States refused an application for a further appeal on the grounds that new evidence was not being offered. It found, in addition, that the lower courts had handled the trial in exemplary fashion.

The sentence was due to be carried out one month before the end of the six months. With a final, desperate cunning, Kennijahn applied through Clissold for a three-month stay of execution, using the full weight of four hundred thousand dollars in bribes, his entire liquid assets. Not even the governor could see why that much money couldn't be gotten hold of, somehow, for the party, of course, especially when it was not an attempt to break the sentence.

But they were all very moral about it. Three months was too long. The public wouldn't like three months. They could make it—well, six weeks.

Six weeks it was.

In its proper time, the Drdr flashed darkly into his cell. Kennijahn stared at the thing wanly, said finally wearily:

"How could a miscarriage of justice like that happen? What is the matter with the world?"

The creature stood easily on the shadowed cement floor, its flat face expressionless. "Nothing the matter. Everything is taking place as fated. Innocent men have been hung before, and afterward people wonder how it could have happened, how they could have supported the crime. But it was simply the victim's destiny."

The thing shrugged, finished, "No matter how you plan your wishes, it will always be like that. So have them please, and release me."

Kennijahn sat for a long, stolid moment, letting that sink in. Abruptly, his head throbbed with reaction—and he was afraid, desperately, horribly, ultimately afraid. He said shakily:

"What kind of a hellish universe is this? Why should I be fated to hang? It's not fair."

"You don't understand." The black shape spoke calmly. "Your death is part of a pattern. No matter what you do, the pattern resumes its shape, new threads covering the places where you have tried to break through. It is all necessary to a cosmic balance of forces."

Kennijahn swallowed hard; then he scowled. "O. K. If this body's got to hang, that's all right with me. I've had six months to think of wishes, and believe me I've got a good one." He paused to gather his thoughts; then:

"Listen: Can you transfer me, with my thoughts, my memories—*me*—into the body of Henry Pearsall, the millionaire?"

"Yes."

Kennijahn almost slobbered in his joy. His whole body shook with horrendous relief. He gasped at last, triumphantly:

"Well, what do you think of it? My destiny is fulfilled. Kennijahn hangs at the appointed hour; and I, in the body of Pearsall, go on."

The red eye fixed on him unwinkingly. "Only one thing wrong: Pearsall is not destined to hang."

"But this way he won't—don't you see? Pearsall's body goes on."

The thing said simply, "This then is your fourth wish?"

It was the quietness of the question that got Kennijahn. He thought in a stark dismay: Three wishes gone, and three to go. *Three gone.* And he had expected to be sitting on top of the world after his first. The fourth wish coming up, and he wasn't even out of jail yet.

Of course, there was that wretched business of his second wish. Utterly wasted. That wouldn't happen again. But, by heaven—

Slowly, his mind steadied. Courage, the sheer physical courage that had enabled him to smash his way ruthlessly to the top, came back. Three wishes left, and actually that was good. Surely, with all his faculties about him, and the experience he'd had, he should be able to hold off that damnable destiny for years.

"Yes," he said, "that's my fourth wish, but don't rush me. I want to get everything straight. You know the Henry Pearsall, I mean. He lives on Oriole Parkway Drive."

"I know the one."

Kennijahn persisted, "The one with that absolutely gorgeous wife; her name is Edith. She's about twenty-eight. He's thirty-four, and worth about seventeen million. You've got that clear?"

The creature looked at him without speaking; and Kennijahn remembered that it had refused once before to answer a question the second time. He said:

"All right, all right, don't get mad. You can't blame me for checking up after what's happened. One last question—" His hard, steel-gray eyes stared straight at the thing. "Have you any faintest idea of what could go wrong with my wish?"

"None. Something will, of course. Don't know what."

Kennijahn smiled grimly. "I'll take my chances. Let's go."

He had arrived home from the office rather late. Even with the memory of the real Henry Pearsall to help him, it was difficult to pick up the threads of another man's life and work. But he would get it. A matter of time was involved. In the meantime, let people think him a little off par.

"The madam," the butler had said,

"has gone out for dinner. She left this note for you."

Pearsall-Kennijahn read the note with a pleasant expansiveness. It was full of little affectionate phrases, and ended with:

—darling, going out tonight was a "must." You know I'd rather be with you, particularly these last ten days since you've taken such a renewed interest in your loving but once sadly neglected wife. I feel as if we're on a second honeymoon. All my heart.

EDITH.

Kennijahn folded the note with a tolerant smile, and put it in his pocket. What a life, getting the pure, full-blossomed love of another man's lovely wife without having to do any preliminary spadework. There had been a little worry in his mind that she would acquire one of those instinctive dislikes for him that you read about in stories. But that fear was past now.

It was while he was eating his dinner that thought of Nina came. He frowned. He'd have to get acquainted with her somehow, perhaps if necessary through his fifth wish. Nina would mourn him, he knew, but not for long. And if she was going to be faithless to his memory, the lucky man might as well be Henry Pearsall.

Funny, how the bare thought of Nina got him going.

From the dining room, he went into the spacious study, with its hunting lodge, overhead-beam construction, and its shelf on shelf of books. Some day, he would read a few of those books just to see what were the springs that moved the real Pearsall's being. At the moment—

He settled himself cozily under a reading lamp, picked up the evening paper, and glanced idly at the headlines.

The two-inch caption that topped the page was about the bombing of Berlin. Underenath that, in smaller type was:

BROKER ESCAPES FROM DEATH HOUSE

"Huh!" gasped Pearsall-Kennijahn. And there was such a dizzy feeling all over him, that he grasped at the arm of the chair. The wild sensation came that he was on the edge of an abyss.

With a titanic effort, Kennijahn slowed his whirling mind, and read on:

William J. Kennijahn, former stock broker, sentenced to hang three days from today, made a daring escape from the death house late this afternoon. The ex-broker, who was recently convicted of murdering his partner, Andrew Harmsworth, is physically an enormously strong man, and, while authorities have as yet issued no statement as to the method of escape, it is believed that this strength enabled him to—

It was the sound of a lock clicking that tore Pearsall-Kennijahn's gaze from that horrifying and fascinating account.

The paper slipped from his grasp, and slid to the floor with a dull thump. It was the queerest, most terrible thing in the world to sit there staring at—himself. Pearsall had somehow squeezed the larger body into one of—Pearsall's—suits. It made a tight fit that looked utterly unnatural.

"And now, you devil from hell," the familiar bass voice lashed at him, "you're going to get yours. I don't know what in Satan's name you've done to me, but you're going to pay for it."

Kennijahn parted his lips to scream for help, but the sound shattered to a gulp in his throat, as his former two-hundred-pound body smashed at the hundred and sixty pounds of flesh and bone that was now his human form.

It wasn't even a fight. He struggled, breathed hoarsely; and then a fist of sledge-hammer potency connected with his jaw—

When he came to, there was a cruel gag in his mouth, and his hands were bound behind his back with cords so tight that he winced from the deadly cutting pain.

And then he saw what his captor was doing.

The man was chuckling under his breath, a sound utterly unhuman; and he had already flung the rope over one of the overhead beams, with the dangling noose neatly tied. Still chuckling, he came to the bound man.

"We mustn't waste any time," he giggled. "We'll just fit your head into the rope, and then I'll do the pulling. Come, come, now—no shrinking. Fixed it up myself while I was waiting for you. And I know your neck size. Fifteen inches, isn't it? It'll be a little tighter than that, actually, in the final issue, but—

Kennijahn was thinking so hard, so piercingly of Drdr that, in addition to all his other pains, his head began to ache agonizingly from the appalling effort.

But the seconds passed—and there was no Drdr. He thought despairingly: The gag, the damnable gag was preventing him from calling the creature and—

He was under the rope when it happened. There was blackness, and then he was lying on his back. It took a long moment to grasp that he was stretched out on the hard bunk of a prison cell.

He lay there, and gradually grew conscious of an incongruous fact—the fact that he was sighing with relief at being in the death cell again.

He was trembling. His fingers shook as he took a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, and went to the "fool-proof" electric lighter on the wall. The cigarette nearly fell to the floor.

Abruptly, his knees felt so weak that he had to sit down. The creature said from the corner:

"I saved you just in time. It is important to me that you have all your wishes, so that I may return to my abode."

So that was it. For its own selfish reasons, the Drdr had pulled him out of a nasty mess. Well, the reason didn't matter. Here he was, four wishes gone—and his destiny still to beat.

Destiny—the ague came back. For he believed. His body shook, and his face felt hot and feverish. *He believed.* The whole, hellish thing was true. He

was born to be hanged, and each time now, each wish that had seemed so sure-fire, so normally bound to produce the desired results, had brought him closer to his black doom.

The time for normal wishes was past.

"Look," he said breathlessly, "isn't there anybody who has ever escaped their destiny? Are there no exceptions? Does the pattern always run true?"

He saw that the creature was hesitating, its eye narrowed. With a roar, Kennijahn clutched at the straw: "There is something. Tell me. Quick!"

"There are always exceptions," came the slow answer. "It is not a good thing to talk about the failures, or even to call them failures. Sooner or later, they fulfill their destiny. It is only a matter of time."

"A matter of time," Kennijahn shouted. "You fool, what do you think I'm fighting for? Time, time—anything to hold off the rope. What kind of people are these exceptions?"

"Usually wealthy men who have slid off into some byway. Or who accidentally received money as the result of some involved plan that was not originally intended to include them."

"Oh!" Kennijahn sat intent. His mind clenched; his voice sounded unnormal in his ears, as he said finally, "Is there any young, reasonably good-looking, wealthy man among them *whose destiny is to die by hanging?*"

"There is."

Kennijahn sagged, so great was the reaction. He lay there on the bunk, breathing heavily, the black doubts raging through his mind. Slowly, he roused himself, and quavered:

"After all, I've still got Wishes 5 and 6. If anything should go wrong—but I can see now, this is the best bet: Taking the body of a man who is destined to hang, but who has been missed in the shuffle. There won't be any escaping from jail for him, the way Pearsall did."

Thought of Pearsall sent a cold shiver down his spine. Then a wave of anger came. He snarled, "I've a good mind to wait until the night before the hanging, and try that wish again. After all, he couldn't escape a second time."

Something in the creature's gaze made him say sharply, "Or can he?"

The thing shrugged, said, "A man not fated to hang, will not hang. Has it occurred to you to wonder how he succeeded in escaping from this cell in the first place?"

"What do you mean?"

"For a while he was simply stunned. Then he grew desperate and made his attempt—and no bars could hold him. If they had tried to hang him, the rope would have slipped from his neck. It has happened, you know, several times."

Kennijahn could only shudder. He managed, finally, "You know what I want. So put me into that body before the Fates grow impatient and send a mob to lynch me."

There was a blinding, choking, terrible pain. A long moment of that sustained, racking agony; and then came the most awful realization that had ever pierced his brain:

He was hanging by his neck.

He couldn't see, he couldn't breathe. Dimly, in a blaze of horror, he was conscious that his hands were tied behind him; and there was a stark memory, the other man's memory, of a determination that life was not worth living, and that suicide was the answer.

Drdr had put him in the body of a man in the *act* of committing suicide by hanging.

Drdr, you scum, you betrayer, what about the sixth wish? Get hands—free hands. Man must have tied his own hands—couldn't do that perfectly.

His hands were free for long seconds before realization came that they were fumbling at the rope around his throat, fighting for easement. With a final, all-out effort, he grabbed the rope above his head, and hoisted himself like a man climbing a bar.

The deadly, cutting choking horror on his neck relaxed.

Desperately, then, he clung there, conscious of the utter physical weakness of this body, the inability of this man's muscles to maintain for—any time—his present position.

But after a moment his vision came blurriedly back. He saw distortedly a great room full of packing cases and—through a window—the top of a tree.

An attic; he was in the attic of the millionaire would-be suicide's home and—

His voice came back. It was a harsh, raspy voice that kept catching, as if hooks were snagging at it. But he managed to scream:

"Drdrl"

The sound of that scratchy voice echoed hollowly, as he repeated the name shrilly; and then—there was the black, the loathsome, the treacherous beast.

The demonlike thing stood on the floor below him, and looked curiously up at him from its enormous red eye.

"Get me down from here," Kennijahn croaked. "Get me down safely. "My . . . sixth . . . wish. Hurry, hurry . . . I can't hold on much longer; and I haven't . . . the strength . . . to climb up farther and . . . untie the rope. I—"

The enormous casualness of the other's manner struck him momentarily dumb He raged finally:

"Hurry . . . my sixth wish. I tell you, you've got to . . . you can't get out of it. You said so yourself."

The little monster stared up at him with unblinking eye. "You've had your sixth wish," the thing said coolly. "This is your sixth."

Kennijahn had the curious, mad feeling that his nerves were shattering into a million pieces. There was something in the manner of the creature, a casual, mind-wrecking positivity that—

"Whaddaya mean?" he gasped. "You said I had two more. You said—"

"If you will remember," came the precise reply, "it was you who said that you had two more. And as you did not actually ask if it was so, naturally I was not compelled to volunteer the information.

"Where you went astray was in assuming that I only answered wishes that were spoken. When I released you from Henry Pearsall's body, it was in answer to the strongest wish that had ever been in your mind, but it was a thought-wish.

"I am not accountable for your assumptions, though I must satisfy you that I have fulfilled all your wishes. This is now done, and I am free."

He whisked out of sight; and Kennijahn clung there with a queer, fascinated awareness that he could hold on—for seconds longer.

William J. Kennijahn was alone with his destiny.

THE END.

Blind Alley

by Malcolm Jameson

He was rich and old, and he longed for the good old days, and the good old ways of his youth. So he made a bargain by which he got back to those days, and those ways, and—

Illustrated by Kramer.

Nothing was further from Mr. Feathersmith's mind that dealings with streamlined, mid-twentieth-century witches or dickerings with the Devil. But something *had* to be done. The world was fast going to the bowwows, and he suffered from an overwhelming nostalgia for the days of his youth. His thoughts constantly turned to Cliffordsville and the good old days when men were men and God was in His heaven and all was right with the world. He hated modern women, the blatancy of the radio, That Man in the White House, the war—

Mr. Feathersmith did not feel well. His customary grouch—which was a byword throughout all the many properties of Pyramidal Enterprises, Inc.—had hit an all-time high. The weather was rotten, the room too hot, business awful, and everybody around him a dope. He loathed all mention of the war, which in his estimation had been bungled from the start. He writhed and cursed whenever he thought of priorities, quotas and taxes; he frothed at the mouth at every new government regulation. His plants were working night and day on colossal contracts that under any reasonable regime would double his wealth every six months, but what could he expect but a few paltry millions?

He jabbed savagely at a button on his desk, and before even the swiftest-footed of messengers could have responded, he was irritably rattling the hook of his telephone.

"Well?" he snarled, as a tired, harassed voice answered. "Where's Paulson? Wake him up! I want him."

Paulson popped into the room with an inquiring, "Yes, sir?" Mr. Paulson was his private secretary and to his mind stupid, clumsy and unambitious. But he was a male. For Mr. Feathersmith could not abide the type of woman that cluttered up offices in these decadent days. Everything about them was distasteful—their bold, assured manner; their calm assumption of efficiency, their persistent invasion of fields sacred to the stronger and wiser sex. He abhorred their short skirts, their painted faces and their varnished nails, the hussies! And the nonchalance with which they would throw a job in an employer's face if he undertook to drive them was nothing short of maddening. Hence Mr. Paulson.

"I'm roasting," growled Mr. Feather-

smith. "This place is an oven."

"Yes, sir," said the meek Paulson, and went to the window where an expensive air-conditioning unit stood. It regulated the air, heating it in winter, cooling it in summer. It was cold and blustery out and snow was in the air; Mr. Feathersmith should have been grateful. But he was not. It was a modern gadget, and though a touch of the hand was all that was needed to regulate it, he would have nothing to do with it. All Paulson did was move a knob one notch.

"What about the Phoenix Development Shares?" barked the testy old man. "Hasn't Ulrich unloaded those yet? He's had time enough."

"The S. E. C. hasn't approved them yet," said Paulson, apologetically. He might have added, but thought best not to, that Mr. Farquhar over there had said the prospectus stank and that the whole proposition looked like a bid for a long-term lease on a choice cell in a Federal penitentiary.

"*Aw-r-rk,*" went Mr. Feathersmith, "a lot of Communists, that's what they are. What are we coming to? Send Clive i ."

."Mr. Clive is in court, sir. And so is Mr. Blakeslee. It's about the reorganization plan for the Duluth, Moline & Southern—the bondholders protective committee—"

"*Aw-r-rk,*" choked Mr. Feathersmith. Yes, those accursed bondholders—always yelping and starting things. "Get out. I want to think."

His thoughts were bitter ones. Never in all his long and busy life had things been as tough as now. When he had been simply Jack Feathersmith, the promoter, it had been possible to make a fortune overnight. You could lose at the same rate, too, but still a man had a chance. There were no starry-eyed reformers always meddling with him. Then he had become the more dignified "entrepreneur," but the pickings were still good. After that he had styled himself "investment banker" and had done well, though a certain district attorney raised some nasty questions about it an forced some refunds and adjustments. But that had been in the '30s when times were hard for everybody. Now, with a war on and everything, a man of ability and brains ought to mop up. But would they let him? *Aw-r-rk!*

Suddenly he realized he was panting and heaving and felt very, very weak. He must be dying. But that couldn't be right. No man of any age kept better fit. Yet his heart was pounding and he had to gasp for every breath. His trembling hand fumbled for the button twice before he found it. Then, as Paulson came back, he managed a faint, "Get a doctor—I must be sick."

For the next little while things were vague. A couple of the hated females from the outer office were fluttering and cooing about the room, and one offered him a glass of water which he spurned. Then he was aware of a pleasant-faced young chap bending over him listening to his chest through a stethoscope. He discovered also that one of those tight, blood-pressure contraptions was wrapped around his arm. He felt the prick of a needle. Then he was lifted to a sitting position and given a couple of pills.

"A little stroke, eh?" beamed the young doctor, cheerily. "Well, you'll be all right in a few minutes. The ephedrine did the trick."

Mr. Feathersmith ground his teeth. If there was anything in this topsy-turvy modern age he liked less than anything else it was the kind of doctors they had. A little stroke, eh? The young whippersnapper! A fresh kid, no more. Now take old Dr. Simpson, back at Cliffordsville. There was a doctor for you—a sober, grave man who wore a beard and a proper Prince Albert coat. There was no folderol about him—newfangled balderdash about basal metabolism, X rays, electrocardiograms, blood counts and all that rot. He simply looked at a patient's tongue, asked him about his bowels,

and then wrote a prescription. And he charged accordingly.

"Do you have these spells often?" asked the young doctor. He was so damn cheerful about it, it hurt.

"Never," blared Mr. Feathersmith; "never was sick a day in my life. Three of you fellows pawed me over for three days, but couldn't find a thing wrong. Consolidated Mutual wrote me a million straight life on the strength of that, and tried their damnedest to sell me another million. That's how good I am."

"Pretty good," agreed the doctor with a laugh. "When was that?"

"Oh, lately—fifteen years ago, about."

"Back in '28, huh? That was when even life insurance companies didn't mind taking a chance now and then. You were still in your fifties then, I take it?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle yet," asserted the old man doggedly. He wanted to pay this upstart off and be rid of him.

"Maybe," agreed the doctor, commencing to put his gear away, "but you didn't look it a little while ago. If I hadn't got here when I did—"

"Look here, young man," defied Mr. Feathersmith, "you can't scare me."

"I'm not trying to," said the young man, easily. "If a heart block can't scare you, nothing can. Just the same, you've got to make arrangements. Either with a doctor or an undertaker. Take your choice. My car's downstairs if you think I'll do."

"*Aw-r-rk,*" sputtered Mr. Feathersmith, but when he tried to get up he realized how terribly weak he was. He let them escort him to the elevator, supporting him on either side, and a moment later was being snugged down on the back seat of the doctor's automobile.

The drive uptown from Wall Street was as unpleasant as usual. More so, for Mr. Feathersmith had been secretly dreading the inevitable day when he would fall into doctors' hands, and now that it had happened, he looked out on the passing scene in search of diversion. The earlier snow had turned to rain, but there were myriads of men and lots of equipment clearing up the accumulation of muck and ice. He gazed at them sourly—*scrape, scrape, scrape*—noise, clamor and dirt, all symptomatic of the modern city. He yearned for Cliffordsville where it rarely snowed, and when it did it lay for weeks in unsullied whiteness on the ground. He listened to the gentle swishing of the whirling tires on the smooth, wet pavement, disgusted at the monotony of it. One street was like another, one city like another—smooth, endless concrete walled in by brick and plate glass and dreary rows of light poles. No one but a fool would live in a modern city. Or a modern town, for that matter, since they were but unabashed tiny imitations of their swollen sisters. He sighed. The good old days were gone beyond recapture.

It was that sigh and that forlorn thought that turned his mind to Forfin. Forfin was a shady fellow he knew and once or twice had employed. He was a broker of a sort, for the lack of better designation. He hung out in a dive near Chatham Square and was altogether a disreputable person, yet he could accomplish strange things. Such as dig up information known only to the dead, or produce prophecies that could actually be relied on. The beauty of dealing with him was that so long as the fee was adequate—and it had to be that—he delivered the goods and asked no questions. His only explanation of his peculiar powers was that he had contacts—gifted astrologers and numerologists, unprincipled demonologists and their ilk. He was only a go-between, he insisted, and invariably required a signed waiver before undertaking any assignment. Mr. Feathersmith recalled now that once when he had complained of a twinge of rheumatism that Forfin had hinted darkly at being able to produce some of the water of the Fountain of Youth. At a price, of course. And when the price

was mentioned, Mr. Feathersmith had haughtily ordered him out of the office.

The doctor's office was the chamber of horrors he had feared. There were many rooms and cubbyholes filled with shiny adjustable enameled torture chairs and glassy cabinets in which rows of cruel instruments were laid. There were fever machines and other expensive-looking apparatus, and a laboratory full of mysterious tubes and jars. White-smocked nurses and assistants flitted noiselessly about like helpful ghosts. They stripped him and weighed him and jabbed needles in him and took his blood. They fed him messy concoctions and searched his innards with a fluoroscope; they sat him in a chair and snapped electrodes on his wrists and ankle to record the pounding of his heart on a film. And after other thumpings, listenings and measurings, they left him weary and quivering to dress himself alone.

Naked as he was, and fresh from the critical probing of the doctor and his gang, he was unhappily conscious of how harshly age had dealt with him after all. He was pink and lumpy now where he had once been firm and tanned. His spindly shanks seemed hardly adequate for the excess load he now carried about his middle. Until now he had valued the prestige and power that goes with post-maturity, but now, for the first time in his life, he found himself hankering after youth again. Yes, youth would be desirable on any terms. It was a thoughtful Mr. Feathersmith who finished dressing that afternoon.

The doctor was waiting for him in his study, as infernally cheerful as ever. He motioned the old man to a chair.

"You are a man of the world," he began, "so I guess you can take it. There is nothing to be alarmed over—immediately. But you've got to take care of yourself. If you do, there are probably a good many years left in you yet. You've got a cardiac condition that has to be watched, some gastric impairments, your kidneys are pretty well shot, there are signs of senile arthritis, and some glandular failure and vitamin deficiency. Otherwise, you are in good shape."

"Go on." Now Mr. Feathersmith knew he would have to get in touch with Forfin.

"You've got to cut out all work, avoid irritation and excitement, and see me at least weekly. No more tobacco, no liquor, no spicy or greasy foods, no late hours. I'm giving you a diet and some prescriptions as to pills and tablets you will need—"

The doctor talked on, laying down the law in precise detail. His patient listened dumbly, resolving steadfastly that he would do nothing of the sort. Not so long as he had a broker on the string who could contact magicians.

That night Mr. Feathersmith tried to locate Forfin, but Forfin could not be found. The days rolled by and the financier felt better. He was his old testy self again and promptly disregarded all his doctor's orders. Then he had his second heart attack, and that one nearly took him off. After that he ate the vile diet, swallowed his vitamin and gland-extract pills, and duly went to have his heart examined. He began liquidating his many business interests. Sooner or later his scouts would locate Forfin. After that he would need cash, and lots of it. Youth, he realized now, was worth whatever it could be bought for.

The day he met with his lawyers and the buyers' lawyers to complete the sale of Pyramidal Enterprises, Inc., Mr. Blakeslee leaned over and whispered that Forfin was back in town. He would be up to see Mr. Feathersmith that night. A gleam came into the old man's eye and he nodded. He was ready. By tomorrow all his net worth would be contained in cash and negotiable securities. It was slightly over thirty-two million dollars altogether, an ample bribe for the most squeamish demonologist and enough left over for

the satisfaction of whatever dark powers his incantations might raise. He was confident money would do the trick. It always had, for him, and was not the love of it said to be the root of all evil?

Mr. Feathersmith was elated. Under ordinary circumstances he would have conducted a transaction of the magnitude of selling Pyramidal with the maximum of quibbling and last-minute haggling. But today he signed all papers with alacrity. He even let Polaris Petroleum & Pipeline go without a qualm, though the main Polaris producing field was only a few miles south of his beloved Cliffordsville. He often shuddered to think of what an oil development would do to a fine old town like that, but it made him money and, anyhow, he had not been back to the place since he left it years ago to go and make his fortune.

After the lawyers had collected their papers and gone, he took one last look around. In his office, as in his apartment, there was no trace of garish chromium and red leather. It was richly finished in quiet walnut paneling with a single fine landscape on one wall. A bookcase, a big desk, two chairs and a Persian rug completed the furnishings. The only ultramodern feature was the stock ticker and the news teletype. Mr. Feathersmith liked his news neat and hot off the griddle. He couldn't abide the radio version, for it was adorned and embellished with the opinions and interpretations of various commentators and self-styled experts.

It was early when he got home. By chance it was raining again, and as he stepped from his limousine under the marquee canopy that hung out over the sidewalk, the doorman rushed forward with an umbrella lest a stray drop wet his financial highness. Mr. Feathersmith brushed by the man angrily—he he did not relish sycophantism, he thought. Flunkies, pah! He went up in the elevator and out into the softly lit corridor that led to his apartment. Inside he found his houseboy, Felipe, listening raptly to a swing version of a classic, playing it on his combination FM radio and Victrola.

"Shut that damn thing off!" roared Mr. Feathersmith. Symphonic music he liked, when he was in the mood for it, but nothing less.

Then he proceeded to undress and have his bath. It was the one bit of ritual in his day that he really enjoyed. His bathroom was a marvel of beauty and craftsmanship—in green and gold tile with a sunken tub. There was a needle bath, too, a glass-inclosed shower, and a sweat chamber. He reveled for a long time in the steamy water. Then, remembering that Forfin might come at any time, he hurried out.

His dinner was ready. Mr. Feathersmith glowered at the table as he sat down. It was a good table to look at, but that was not the way he felt about it. The cloth was cream-colored damask and the service exquisitely tooled sterling; in the center sat a vase of roses with sprays of ferns. But the crystal pitcher beside his plate held certified milk, a poor substitute for the vintage Pommard he was accustomed to. Near it lay a little saucer containing the abominable pills—six of them, two red, two brown, one black, and one white.

He ate his blue points. After that came broiled pompano, for the doctor said he could not get too much fish. Then there was fresh asparagus and creamed new potatoes. He topped it off with fresh strawberries and cream. No coffee, no liqueur.

He swallowed the stuff mechanically, thinking of all the white of Chub's place, back in Cliffordsville. There a man could get an honest-to-goodness beefsteak, two inches thick and reeking with fat, fresh cut from a steer killed that very day in Chub's back yard. He thought, too, of Pablo, the tamale man. His stand was on the corner by the Opera House, and he kept his sizzling product in a huge lard can wrapped in an old red tablecloth. The can sat on

a small charcoal stove so as to keep warm, and the whole was in a basket. Pablo dished out the greasy, shuck-wrapped morsels onto scraps of torn newspaper and one sat down on the curb and ate them with his fingers. They may have been made of fragments of dog—as some of his detractors alleged—but they were good. Ten cents a dozen, they were. Mr. Feathersmith sighed another mournful sigh. He would give ten thousand dollars for a dozen of them right now—and the ability to eat them.

Feathersmith waited impatiently for Forfin to come. He called the operator and instructed her to block all calls except that announcing his expected guest. Damn that phone, anyway. All that any Tom, Dick or Harry who wanted to intrude had to do was dial a number. The old man had an unlisted phone, but people who knew where he lived called through the house switchboard notwithstanding.

At length the shifty little broker came. Mr. Feathersmith lost no time in approaches or sparring. Forfin was a practical man like himself. You could get down to cases with him without blush or apology.

"I want," Mr. Feathersmith said, baldly, "to turn the hand of the clock back forty years. I want to go to the town of Cliffordsville, where I was born and raised, and find it just as I left it. I propose to start life all over again. Can you contact the right people for the job?"

"Phew!" commented Mr. Forfin, mopping his head. "That's a big order. It scares me. That'll involve Old Nick himself—"

He looked uneasily about, as if the utterance of the name was a sort of inverted blasphemy.

"Why not?" snapped the financier, bristling. "I always deal with principals. They can act. Skip the hirelings, demons, or whatever they are."

"I know," said Forfin, shaking his head disapprovingly, "but he's a slick bargainer. Oh, he keeps his pacts—to the dot. But he'll slip a fast one over just the same. It's his habit. He gets a kick out of it—outsmarting people. And it'll cost. Cost like hell."

"I'll be the judge of the cost," said

the old man, stiffly, thinking of the scant term of suffering, circumscribed years that was the best hope the doctor had held out to him, "and as to bargaining, I'm not a pure sucker. How do you think I got where I am?"

"O. K.," said Forfin, with a shrug. "It's your funeral. But it'll take some doing. When do we start?"

"Now."

"He sees mortals only by appointment, and I can't make 'em. I'll arrange for you to meet Madame Hecate. You'll have to build yourself up with her. After that you're on your own. You'd better have plenty of ready dough. You'll need it."

"I've got it," said Mr. Feathersmith shortly. "And yours?"

"Forget it. I get my cut from *them*."

That night sleep was slow in coming. He reviewed his decision and did not regret it. He had chosen the figure of forty deliberately. Forty from seventy left thirty—in his estimation the ideal age. If he were much younger, he would be pushed around by his seniors; if he were much older, he wouldn't gain so much by the jump back. But at thirty he would be in the prime of physical condition, old enough to be thought of as mature by the youngsters, and young enough to command the envy of the oldsters. And, as he remembered it, the raw frontier days were past, the effete modernism yet to come.

He slept. He dreamed. He dreamed of old Cliffordsville, with its tree-lined streets and sturdy houses sitting way back, each in its own yard and behind its own picket fence. He remembered the soft clay streets and how good the dust felt between the toes when he ran barefoot in the summertime. Memories of good things to eat came to him—the old spring house and watermelons hung in bags in the well, chickens running the yard, and eggs an hour old. There was Sarah, the cow, and old Aunt Anna, the cook. And then there were the wide-open business opportunities of those days. A man could start a bank or float a stock company and there were no snooping inspectors to tell him what he could and couldn't do. There were no blaring radios, or rumbling, stinking trucks or raucous auto horns. People stayed healthy because they led the good life. Mr. Feathersmith rolled over in bed and smiled. It wouldn't be long now!

The next afternoon Forfin called him. Madame Hecate would see him at five; and he gave a Fifth Avenue address. That was all.

Mr. Feathersmith was really surprised when he entered the building. He had thought a witch would hang out in some dubious district where there was grime and cobwebs. But this was one of the swankiest buildings in a swanky street. It was filled with high-grade jewelers and diamond merchants, for the most part. He wondered if he had heard the address wrong.

At first he was sure he had, for when he came to examine the directory board he could find no Hecate under the H's or any witches under the W's. He stepped over to the elevator starter and asked him whether there was a tenant by that name.

"If she's on the board, there is," said that worthy, looking Mr. Feathersmith up and down in a disconcerting fashion. He went meekly back to the board. He rubbed his eyes. There was her name—in both places: "Madame Hecate, Consultant Witch. Suite 1313."

He went back to the elevators, then noticed that the telltale arcs over the doors were numbered—10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and so on. There was no thirteenth floor. He was about to turn to the starter again when he noticed a small car down at the end of the hall. Over its door was the label, "Express to 13th Floor." He walked down to it and stepped inside. An insolent little guy in a red monkey jacket lounged against the starting lever. He leered up at Mr. Feathersmith and said:

"Are you *sure* you want to go up, pop?"

Mr. Feathersmith gave him the icy stare he had used so often to quell previous impertinences, and then stood rigidly looking out the door. The little hellion slid the door to with a shrug and started the cab.

When it stopped he got off in a small foyer that led to but a single door. The sign on the door said merely "Enter," so Mr. Feathersmith turned the knob and went in. The room looked like any other midtown reception room. There was a desk presided over by a lanky, sour woman of uncertain age, whose only noteworthy feature was her extreme pallor and haggard eyes. The walls were done in a flat blue-green pastel color that somehow hinted at iridescence, and were relieved at the top by a frieze of interlaced pentagons of gold and black. A single etching hung on the wall, depicting a conventionalized witch astride a broomstick silhouetted against a full moon, accompanied by a flock of bats. A pair of chairs and a sofa completed the furnishings. On the sofa a huge black cat slept on a red velvet pillow.

"Madame Hecate is expecting you," said the cadaverous receptionist in a harsh, metallic voice. "Please be seated."

"Ah, a zombi," thought Mr. Feathersmith, trying to get into the mood of his environment. Then as a gesture of good will, though he had no love for any animal, he bent over and stroked the cat. It lifted its head with magnificent deliberation, regarded him venomously for a moment through baleful green eyes; then, with the most studied contempt, spat. After that it promptly tucked its head back in its bosom as if that disposed of the matter for all eternity.

"Lucifer doesn't like people," remarked the zombi, powdering her already snowy face. Just then a buzzer sounded faintly, three times.

"The credit man is ready for you," said the ghostly receptionist. "You'll have to pass him first. This way, please."

For some reason that did not astonish Mr. Feathersmith as much as some other features of the place. After all, he was a businessman, and even in dealing with the myrmidons of Hell, business was business. He followed her through the inner door and down a side passage to a little office. The fellow who received him was an affable, thin young man, with brooding, dark-brown eyes, and an errant black lock that kept falling down and getting in his eyes.

"A statement of your net worth, please," asked the young man, indicating a chair. He turned and waved a hand about the room. It was lined with fat books, shelf after shelf of them, and there were filing cases stuffed with loose papers and photographs. "I should warn you in advance that we have already made an independent audit and know the answer. It is a formality, as it were. Thought you ought to know."

Mr. Feathersmith gazed upon the books with wonderment. Then his blood ran chill and he felt the gooseflesh rise on him and a queer bristly feeling among the short hairs on the back of his neck. The books were all about *him!* There were two rows of thick volumes neatly titled in gold leaf, such as "J. Feathersmith—Private Life —Volume IX." There was one whole side of the room lined with other books, in sets. One set was labeled "Business Transactions," another "Subconscious Thoughts and Dreams," and then other volumes on various related aspects of their subject. One that shocked him immensely bore the horrid title of "Indirect Murders, Et Cetera." For an instant he did not grasp its import, until he recalled the aftermath of the crash of Trans-Mississippi Debentures. It was a company he had bought into only to find it mostly water. He had done the only thing to do and get out

with a profit—he blew the water up into vapor, then pulled the plug. A number of suicides resulted. He supposed the book was about that and similar fiascoes.

He turned to face the Credit Man and was further dismayed to see that gentleman scrutinizing a copy of the contract of sale of the Pyramidal company. So he knew the terms exactly! Worse, on the blotter in plain sight was a photostat copy of a will that he had made out that very morning. It was an attempt on Mr. Feathersmith's part to hedge. He had left all his money to the Simonist Brotherhood for the propagation of religion, thinking to use it as a bargaining point with whatever demon showed up to negotiate with him. Mr. Feathersmith scratched his neck—a gesture of annoyance at being forestalled that he had not used for years. It was all the more irritating that the Credit Man was purring softly and smiling to himself.

"Well?" said the Credit Man.

Mr. Feathersmith had lost the first round and knew it. He had come in to arrange a deal and to dictate, more or less, his own terms. Now he was at a distinct disadvantage. There was only one thing to do if he wanted to go on; that was to come clean. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. There was one-scribbled line on it. "Net worth—$32,673,251.03, plus personal effects."

"As of noon, today," added Mr. Feathersmith, handing the paper across the desk.

The Credit Man glanced at it, then shoved it into a drawer with the comment that it appeared to be substantially correct. Then he announced that that was all. He could see Madame Hecate now.

Madame Hecate turned out to be the greatest surprise so far. Mr. Feathersmith had become rather dubious as to his ability to previse these strange people he was dealing with, but he was quite sure the witch would be a hideous creature with an outjutting chin meeting a down-hanging beak and with the proverbial hairy warts for facial embellishments. She was not like that at all. Madame Hecate was as cute a little trick as could be found in all the city. She was a vivacious, tiny brunette with sparkling eyes and a gay, carefree manner, and was dressed in a print housedress covered by a tan smock.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Feathersmith," she gurgled, wiping her hands on a linen towel and tossing it into a handy container. "The audience with His Nibs is arranged for about an hour from now. Ordinarily he only comes at midnight, but lately he has had to spend so much time on Earth he works on a catch-as-catch-can basis. At the moment he is in Germany—it is midnight there now, you know—giving advice to one of his most trusted mortal aids. No doubt you could guess the name, but for reasons you will appreciate, our clientele is regarded as confidential. But he'll be along shortly."

"Splendid," said Mr. Feathersmith. For a long time it had been a saying of his that he wouldn't wait an hour for and appointment with the Devil himself. But circumstances had altered. He was glad that he had *only* an hour o wait.

"Now," said the witch, shooting him a coy, sidelong glance, "let's get the preliminaries over with. A contract will have to be drawn up, of course, and that takes time. Give me the main facts as to what you want, and I'll send them along to the Chief Fiend in the Bureau of Covenants. By the time His Nibs gets here, the scribes will have everything ready."

She produced a pad and a pencil and waited, smiling sweetly at him.

"Well, uh," he said, a trifle embarrassed because he did not feel like telling her *quite* all that was in his mind—she seemed such an innocent to be in the witch business, "I had an idea it would be nice to go back to the town of my boyhood to spend the rest of my life—"

"Yes?" she said eagerly. "And then—"

"Well," he finished lamely, "I guess that's about all. Just put me back in Cliffordsville as of forty years ago—that's all I want."

"How unique!" she exclaimed, delightedly. "You know, most men want power and wealth and success in love and all that sort of thing. I'm sure His Nibs will grant this request instantly."

Mr. Feathersmith grunted. He was thinking that he had already acquired all those things from an uninformed, untrained start in that same Cliffordsville just forty years ago. Knowing what he did now about men and affairs and the subsequent history of the world, what he would accomplish on the second lap would astonish the world. But the thought suggested an addendum.

"It should be understood," he appended, "that I am to retain my present . . . uh . . . wisdom, unimpaired, and complete memory."

"A trifle, Mr. Feathersmith," she bubbled; "a trifle, I assure you."

He noticed that she had noted the specifications on separate sheets of paper, and since he indicated that was all, she advanced to a nearby brazier that stood on a tripod and lit them with a burning candle she borrowed from a sconce. The papers sizzled smartly into greenish flame, curled and disappeared without leaving any ash.

"They are there now," she said. "Would you like to see our plant while you wait?"

"With pleasure," he said, with great dignity. Indeed, he was most curious about the layout, for the room they were in was a tiny cubicle containing only a high desk and a stool and the brazier. He had expected more demoniac paraphernalia.

She led the way out and he found the place was far more extensive than he thought. It must cover the entire floor of the building. There was a long hall, and off it many doors.

"This is the Alchemical Department," she said, turning into the first one. "I was working in here when you came. That is why my hands were so gummy. Dragon fat is vile stuff, don't you think?"

She flashed those glowing black eyes on him and a dazzling smile.

"I can well imagine," he replied.

He glanced into the room. At first sight it had all the appearance of a modern chemical laboratory, though many of the vessels were queerly shaped. The queerest of all were the alchemists, of whom about a dozen sat about on high stools. They were men of incalculable age, bearded and wearing heavy-rimmed octagonal-lensed eyeglasses. All wore black smocks spattered with silvery crescents, sunbursts, stars, and such symbols. All were intent on their work. The bottles on the tables bore fantastic labels, such as "asp venom," "dried cameleopard blood," and "powdered unicorn horn."

"The man at the alembic," explained the witch, sweetly, "is compounding a modified love philter. You'd be surprised how many star salesmen depend on it. It makes them virtually irresistible. We let them have it on a commission basis."

She pointed out some other things, such as the two men adjusting the rheostat on an electric athanor, all of which struck Mr. Feathersmith as being extremely incongruous. Then they passed on.

The next room was the Voodoo Department, where a black sculptress was hard at work fashioning wax dolls from profile and front-view photographs of her clients' most hated enemies. An assistant was studying a number of the finished products and occasionally thrusting pins into certain vital parts. There were other unpleasant things to be seen there and Mr. Feathersmith shuddered and suggested they pass on.

"If it affects you that way," said the witch, with her most beguiling smile, "maybe we had better skip the next."

The next section was devoted to Demonology and Mr. Feathersmith was willing to pass it by, having heard something of the practices of that sect. Moreover, the hideous moans and suppressed shrieks that leaked through the wall were sufficient to make him lose any residual interest in the orgies. But it was not to be. A door was flung open and an old hag tottered out, holding triumphantly aloft a vial of glowing violet vapor.

"Look," she cackled with hellish glee, "I caught it! The anguish of a dying hen! He! He!"

Mr. Feathersmith suffered a twinge of nausea and a bit of fright, but the witch paused long enough to coo a few words of praise.

She popped her head into the door beyond where a senile practitioner could be seen sitting in a black robe and dunce's cap spangled with stars and the signs of the zodiac. He was in the midst of a weird planetarium.

"This is the phoniest racket in the shop," she murmured, "but the customers love it. The old guy is a shrewd guesser. That's why he gets by. Of course, his horoscopes and all these props are just so much hogwash—custom, you know."

Mr. Feathersmith flicked a glance at the astrologer, then followed her into the next room. A class of neophytes appeared to be undergoing instruction in the art of Vampirism. A demon with a pointer was holding forth before a set of wall charts depicting the human circulatory system and emphasizing the importance of knowing just how to reach the carotid artery and jugular vein. The section just beyond was similar. It housed the Department of Lycanthropy and a tough-looking middle-aged witch was lecturing on the habits of predatory animals. As Mr. Feathersmith and his guide looked in, she was just concluding some remarks on the value of prior injections of aqua regia as a resistant to possible silver bullets.

He never knew what other departments were in the place, for the witch happened to glance up at one of the curious clocks that adorned the walls. She said it kept Infernal time. At any rate, His Nibs was due shortly. They must hurry to the Apparition Chamber.

That awesome place was in a class by itself. Murals showing the torments of Hell covered the long walls. At one end was a throne, at the other a full-length portrait of His Nibs himself.

surrounded by numerous photographs. The portrait was the conventional one of the vermilion anthropoid modified by barbed tail, cloven hoofs, horns, and a wonderfully sardonic leer. The rest of the pictures were of ordinary people—some vaguely familiar to Mr. Feathersmith.

"His Vileness always appears to mortals as one of their own kind," explained the witch, seeing Mr. Feathersmith's interest in the gallery. "It works out better that way."

Two imps were bustling about, arranging candles and bowls of incense about a golden pentagon embedded in the black composition floor. There were other cabalistic designs worked into the floor by means of metallic strips set edgewise, but apparently they were for lesser demons or jinn. The one receiving attention at the moment was immediately before the throne. The witch produced a pair of ear plugs and inserted them into Mr. Feathersmith's ears. Then she blindfolded him, patted him soothingly and told him to take it easy—it was always a little startling the first time.

It was. He heard the spewing of some type of fireworks, and the monotone of the witch's chant. Then there was a splitting peal of thunder, a blaze of light, and a suffocating sulphurous atmosphere. In a moment that cleared and he found his bandage wisked off. Sitting comfortably on the throne before him was a chubby little man wearing a gray pinstriped business suit and smoking a cigar. He had large blue eyes, several chins, and a jovial, back-slapping expression. He might have been a Rotarian and proprietor of a moderate-sized business anywhere.

"Good morning," he said affably. "I understand you want transportation to Cliffordsville of four decades ago. My Executive Committee has approved it, and here it is—"

Satan snapped his fingers. There was a dull *plop* and an explosion of some sort overhead. Then a document fluttered downward. The witch caught it deftly and handed it to His Nibs, who glanced at it and presented it to Mr. Feathersmith.

Whether the paper was parchment or fine-grained asbestos mat, that gentleman could not say. But it was covered with leaping, dazzling letters of fire that were exceedingly hard to read, especially in the many paragraphs of fine print that made up the bulk of the document. Its heading was:

COMPACT

between His Infernal Highness Satan, known hereinafter as The Party of the First Part, and one J. Feathersmith, a loyal and deserving servant, known as The Party of the Second Part. To wit:

The perusal of such a contract would have been child's play for the experienced Mr. Feathersmith, had it not been for the elusive nature of the dancing letters, since only the part directly under his eye was legible. The rest was lost in the fiery interplay of squirming script and had the peculiar property of seeming to give a different meaning at every reading. Considered as a legal document, thought Mr. Feathersmith out of the depths of his experience, it was a honey. It seemed to mean what it purported to mean, yet—

At any rate, there was a clause there that plainly stated, even after repeated readings, that The Party of the Second Part would be duly set down at the required destination, furnished with necessary expense money and a modest stake, and thereafter left on his own.

"The compensation?" queried Mr. Feathersmith, having failed to see mention of it. "You'll want my soul, I presume."

"Dear me, no," responded Satan cheerily, with a friendly pat on the knee. "We've owned that outright for many, many years. Money's all we need. You see, if anything happened to you as you are, the government would get about three quarters of it and

the lawyers the rest. We hate to see that three quarters squandered in subversive work—such as improved housing and all that rot. So, if you'll kindly give us your check—"

"How much?" Mr. Feathersmith wanted to know, reaching for his checkbook.

"Thirty-three million," said Satan calmly.

"That's outrageous!" shouted the client. "I haven't that much—"

"There was to be one percent off for cash, Your Vileness," reminded the witch sweetly.

Mr. Feathersmith glared at both of them. He had been neatly trimmed—right down to chicken feed. His first impulse was to terminate the interview then and there. But he remembered that, given youth and opportunity, he could make any number of fortunes. He also had in mind the dismal future forecast for him by the doctor. No. The transaction had to be gone through with. He meekly signed checks for his full balance, and an order on his brokers for the delivery of all other valuables.

There was one more thing to do—sign the pact.

"Roll up your left sleeve," said the witch. He noticed she held a needle-tipped syringe in one hand and a pad dampened with alcohol in the other. She rubbed him with the cotton, then jabbed him with the needle. When she had withdrawn a few cubic centimeters of blood, she yanked the needle out, unscrewed it and replaced it by a fountain-pen point.

"Our practitioners did awfully sloppy work in the old days," she laughed, as she handed him the gruesomely charged pen and the pact. "You have no idea how many were lost prematurely through infection."

"Uh-huh," said Mr. Feathersmith, rolling down his sleeve and getting ready to sign. He might as well go through with it—the sooner the better.

"Your transportation," she added, handing him a folding railroad ticket with a weird assortment of long-defunct or merged railroads on it, queer dates and destinations. But he saw that it ended where and when he wanted to go.

"Grand Central Station, Track 48, 10:34 tonight."

"Better give him some cash," suggested Satan, hauling out a roll of bills and handing them to her. Mr. Feathersmith looked at them with fast-rising anxiety; the sight of them shook him to the foundations. For they were large, blanketlike sheets of paper, none smaller than a fifty, and many with yellow backs. Satan also handed over a coin purse, in which were some gold pieces and six or eight big silver dollars. Mr. Feathersmith had completely forgotten that they used such money in the old days—pennies and dollar bills were unknown in the West, and fives and tens in paper so rare as to be refused by shopkeepers. How much else had he forgotten? It rattled him so that he did not notice when Satan disappeared, and he allowed himself to be ushered out in a mumbling daze by the little witch.

By train time, though, he had cheered up. There was just the little journey halfway across the continent to be negotiated and the matter of the forty years. No doubt that would occur during the night as a miracle of sorts. He let the redcap carry his luggage aboard the streamlined flier and snugged himself down in his compartment. He had not had to bother with having clothes of the period made to order, for the witch had intimated that those details would be taken care of automatically.

His next job was to compose the story he was going to tell to explain his return to Cliffordsville. Besides other excellent reasons, he had chosen the particular time for his rejuvenation so as to not run foul of himself in his earlier personality or any of his family. It had been just at the close of the Spanish War that both parents had died

of yellow fever, leaving him an orphan and in possession of the old homestead and the parental bank account. He had lost little time in selling the former and withdrawing the latter. After that he had shaken the dust of Cliffordsville from his feet for what he thought was to be all time. By 1902 there was no member of the Feathersmith family residing in the county. His return, therefore, would be regarded merely as an ordinary return. He would give some acceptable explanations, then take up where he had left off. Sooner or later he would pull out again—probably to Detroit to get in on the ground floor with Henry Ford, and he thought it would be a good idea, too, to grab himself some U. S. Steel, General Motors and other comers-to-be. He licked his lips in anticipation of the killing he would make in the subsequent World War I years when he could ride Bethlehem all the way to the top, pyramiding as he went, without a tremor of fear. He also thought with some elation of how much fun it would be to get reacquainted with Daisy Norton, the girl he might have married if he had but stayed in Cliffordsville. She was cold to him then, but that was because her father was a rich aristocrat and looked down upon the struggling Feathersmiths. But this time he would marry her and the Norman acres under which the oil field lay. After that—

He had undressed automatically and climbed into his berth. He let his feverish anticipations run on, getting dozier all the time. He suddenly recalled that he really should have seen the doctor before leaving, but dismissed it with a happy smile. By the time he had hit his upper twenties he was done with whooping cough, measles and mumps. It had been all these years since, before he required the services of a doctor again. He made a mental note that when he next reached sixty he would take a few precautions. And with that happy thought he dropped off into sound sleep.

The Limited slid on through the night, silently and jarless. Thanks to its air conditioning, good springs, well-turned wheels, smooth traction, rock-ballasted roadbed and heavy rails, it went like the wind. For hundreds of miles the green lights of block signals flickered by, but now and again another train would thunder by on an eastbound track. Mr. Feathersmith gave no thought to those things as he pillowed deeper into the soft blankets, or worried about the howling blizzard raging outside. The Limited would get there on time and with the minimum of fuss. That particular Limited went fast and far that night—mysteriously it must have covered in excess of a thousand miles and got well off its usual route. For when Mr. Feathersmith did wake, along toward dawn, things were uncannily different.

To begin with, the train was lurching and rocking violently from side to side, and there was a persistent slapping of a flat wheel underneath. The blizzard had abated somewhat, but the car was cold. He lifted the curtain a bit and looked out on a snow-streaked, hilly landscape that strongly suggested Arkansas. Then the train stopped suddenly in the middle of a field and men came running alongside with lanterns. A hotbox, he heard one call, which struck him as odd, for he had not heard of hotboxes for a long time.

After about an hour, and after prolonged whistling, the train slowly gathered way again. By that time Mr. Feathersmith noticed that his berth had changed during the night. It was an old-fashioned fore-and-aft berth with an upper pressing down upon it. He discovered he was wearing a flannel nightgown, too—another item of his past he had failed to remember, it had been so long since he had changed to silk pajamas. But by then the porter was going through the car rousing all the passengers.

"Gooch Junction in half a' hour,

folks," he was saying. "Gotta get up now—dey drop the sleeper dere."

Mr. Feathersmith groaned and got up. Yes, yes, of course. Through sleepers were the exception, not the rule, forty years ago. He found his underwear—red flannel union suit it was—and his shirt, a stiff-bosomed affair with detachable cuffs and a complicated arrangement of cuff holders. His shoes were Congress gaiters with elastic in the sides, and his suit of black broadcloth beginning to turn green. He got on the lower half of it and bethought himself of his morning shave. He fished under the berth for his bag and found it—a rusty old Gladstone, duly converted as promised. But there was no razor in it of any type he dared use. There was a set of straight razors and strops and a mug for soap, but he would not trust himself to operate with them. The train was much too rough for that.

But he had to wash, so he climbed out of the berth, bumping others, and found the lavatory. It was packed with half-dressed men in the process of shaving. The basins were miserable affairs of marble and supplied by creaky pumps that delivered a tablespoonful of water at a time. The car was finished in garish quartered oak, mahogany, mother-of-pearl and other bright woods fitted into the most atrocious inlays Mr. Feathersmith could have imagined. The taste in decoration, he realized, had made long steps since 1902.

His companions were "drummers"—heavy, well-fed men, all. One was in dry goods; one in coffee, tea and spices; another in whiskey; and two of the rest in patent medicines. Their conversation touched on Bryan and Free Silver, and one denounced Theodore Roosevelt's Imperialism—said it was all wrong for us to annex distant properties like the Sandwich Islands and the Philippines. One man thought Aguinaldo was a hero, another that Funston was the greatest general of all time. But what worried them most was whether they would get to Gooch Junction at all, and if so, how much late.

"We're only an hour behind now," said the whiskey drummer, "but the brakeman told me there's a bad wreck up ahead and it may take 'em all day to clear it—"

"Many killed?"

"Naw. Just a freight—engine crew and brakeman and about a dozen tramps. That's all."

"Shucks. They won't hold us up for that. They'll just pile the stuff up and burn it."

It was ten when they reached the Junction, which consisted of only a signal tower, a crossing, and several sidings. There was no diner on, but the butcher had a supply of candy, paper-thin ham sandwiches on stale bread, and soda pop. If one did not care for those or peanuts, he didn't eat. Dropping the sleeper took a long time and much backing and filling, during which the locomotive ran off the rails and had to be jockeyed back on. Mr. Feathersmith was getting pretty disgusted by the time he reached the day coach and found he had to share a seat with a raw farm boy in overalls and a sloppy old felt hat. The boy had an aroma that Mr. Feathersmith had not smelled for a long, long time. And then he noticed that the aroma prevailed in other quarters, and it came to him all of a sudden that the day was Thursday and considerably removed from last Saturday and presumptive baths.

It was about that time that Mr. Feathersmith became aware that he himself had been unchanged except for wardrobe and accessories. He had expected to wake up youthful. But he did not let it worry him unduly, as he imagined the Devil would come through when he had gone all the way back. He tried to get a paper from the butcher, but all there were were day-old St. Louis papers and the news was chiefly local. He looked for the financial section and only found a quarter of a column where a dozen railroad

bonds were listed. The editor seemed to ignore the Orient and Europe altogether, and there was very little about Congress. After that he settled down and tried to get used to the temperature. At one end of the car there was a pot-bellied cast-iron stove, kept roaring by volunteer stokers, but despite its ruddy color and the tropic heat in the two seats adjacent, the rest of the car was bitter cold.

The train dragged on all day, stopping often on bleak sidings and waiting for oncoming trains to pass. He noticed on the blackboards of the stations they passed that they were now five hours late and getting later. But no one seemed to worry. It was the expected. Mr. Feathersmith discovered he had a great turnip of a gold watch in the pocket of his waistcoat—a gorgeously flowered satin affair, incidentally—and the watch was anchored across his front by a chain heavy enough to grace the bows of a young battleship. He consulted it often, but it was no help. They arrived at Florence, where they should have been before noon, just as the sun was setting. Everybody piled out of the train to take advantage of the twenty-minute stop to eat at the Dining House there.

The food was abundant—fried ham, fried steaks, cold turkey, roast venison and fried chicken and slabs of fried salt pork. But it was all too heavy and greasy for his worn stomach. The fact that the vegetables consisted of four kinds of boiled beans plus cabbage reminded him that he did not have his vitamin tablets with him. He asked for asparagus, but people only looked amused. That was stuff for the rich and it came in little cans. No, no asparagus. Fish? At breakfast they might have salt mackerel. They *could* open a can of salmon. Would that do? He looked at the enormous, floury biscuits, the heavy pitchers of honey and sorghum molasses and a bowl of grits, and decided he would have just a glass of milk. The butter he never even considered, as it was a pale, anæmic salvy substance. They brought him an immense tumbler of buttermilk and he had to make the best of that.

By the time they were back in the cars, the brakeman was going down the aisle, lighting the Pintsch lamps overhead with a lamplighter. The gas had a frightful odor, but no one seemed to mind. It was "up-to-date," not the smelly kerosene they used on some lines.

The night wore on, and in due time the familiar landscape of old Cliffordsville showed up outside the window. Another item he discovered he had forgotten was that Cliffordsville had been there before the railroad was run through. On account of curves and grades, the company had by-passed the town by a couple of miles, so that the station—or depot—stood that distance away. It would have been as good a way as any to approach the town of his childhood, except that on this day the snow had turned to drizzling rain. The delightful clay roads were all right in dry weather, but a mass of bottomless, sticky, rutted mud on a day like this. Mr. Feathersmith walked out onto the open platform of the car and down its steps. He viewed the sodden station and its waterlogged open platform with misgiving. There was but one rig that had come to meet the train. It was the Planter's Hotel bus—a rickety affair with facing fore-and-aft seats approached from the rear by three steps and grab-irons, à la Black Maria. The driver had his storm curtains up, but they were only fastened by little brass gimmicks at the corners and flapped abominably. There were four stout horses drawing the vehicle, but they were spattered with mud up to the belly and the wheels were encrusted with foot-thick adhesions of clay.

"Stranger here?" asked the driver, as he gathered up his reins and urged the animals to break the bus out of the quagmire it had sunk down in.

"I've been here before," said Mr.

Feathersmith, wondering savagely why —back in those good old days—somebody had not had enough gumption to grade and gravel-surface this road. "Does Mr. Toler still run the hotel?"

"Yep. Swell hotel he's got, too. They put in a elevator last year."

That was a help, thought Mr. Feathersmith. As he remembered the place it had twenty-foot ceilings and was three stories high. With *his* heart, at least for the first day here, he was just as happy at not having to climb those weary, steep stairs. And, now that he thought of it, the Planter's Hotel *was* a darn good hotel for its day and time. People said there was nothing like it closer than Dallas.

The drive in took the best part of two hours. The wind tore at the curtains and gusts of rain blew in. Three times they bogged down completely and the driver had to get out and put his shoulder to a wheel as the four horses lay belly-flat against the oozy mud and strained as if their hearts and backs would break. But eventually they drew up before the hotel, passing through streets that were but slightly more passable than the road. Mr. Feathersmith was shocked at the utter absence of concrete or stone sidewalks. Many blocks boasted no sidewalks at all; the others were plank affairs.

A couple of Negro boys lounged before the hotel and upon the arrival of the bus got into a tussle as to which should carry the Gladstone bag. The tussle was a draw, with the result that they both carried it inside, hanging it between them.

The hotel was a shattering disappointment from the outset. Mr. Featherasmith's youthful memories proved very false indeed. The lobby's ceiling was thirty feet high, not twenty, and supported by two rows of cast-iron fluted columns topped with crudely done Corinthian caps. The bases and caps had been gilded once, but they were tarnished now, and the fly-specked marble painting of the shafts was anything but convincing. The floor was alternate diamond squares of marble—black with blue, and spotted with white enameled cast-iron cuspidors of great capacity, whose vicinity attested the poor marksmanship of Cliffordsville's chewers of the filthy weed. The marble-topped desk was decorated by a monstrous ledger, an inkpot and pens, and presided over by a supercilious young man with slicked-down hair neatly parted in the middle and a curly, thick brown mustache.

"A three-dollar room, of course, sir?" queried the clerk, giving the register a twirl and offering the pen.

"Of course," snapped Mr. Feathersmith, "the best. And with bath."

"With bath, sir?" deprecated the young man, as if taking it as a joke. "Why, there is a bath on every floor. Just arrange with the bellboy."

The old financier grunted. He was forgetting things again. He glanced over his shoulder toward the rear of the lobby where a red-hot stove was closely surrounded by a crowd of drummers. It seemed to be the only spot of warmth in the place, but he was intent on his bath. So he accepted the huge key and tag and followed the boy to the elevator. That proved to be a loosely woven, open-cage affair in an open shaft and operated by a cable that ran vertically through it. The boy slammed the outer door—there was no inner—and grasped the cable with both hands and pulled. There was a throaty rumble down below and the car began gradually to ascend. Inch by inch it rose, quivering, at about half the speed of a modern New York escalator. Mr. Feathersmith fumed and fidgeted, but there was no help for it. The elevators of forty years ago were like that. It was just too bad his room was 303.

It was big enough, twenty by twenty by twenty. A perfect cube, containing two gigantic windows which only a Sandow could manage. The huge double bed with heavy mahogany head and

foot pieces was lost in it. Several rocking chairs stood about, and a rag rug was on the floor. But the *pièce de résistance* of the room was the marble-topped washstand. On it rested a porcelain bowl and pitcher and beside it a slop jar. Mr. Feathersmith knew without looking what the cabinet beneath it contained. He walked over to it and looked into the pitcher. The water had a crust of ice on top of it. The room had not a particle of heat!

"I want a bath. Right away," he said to the bellboy. "Hot."

"Yassir," said the boy, scratching his head, "but I ain't know ef the chambermaid's got around to cleaning hit yit. They ain't many as wants bath till tomorrow. I kin go look and see, though."

"I've got some laundry, too. I want it back tomorrow."

"Oh, mister—you-all must be from New Yawk. They ain't no such thing here. They's a steam laundry, but they only take up Mondays and gita it back on Sat'day. My ma kin do it fer you, but that'll have to be Monday, too. She irons awful nice. They's mighty little she ever burns—and steal!—why, white folks, you could trust her with anything you got. Now'n then she loses a hand-'chuf er some little thing like that, but steal—nossir."

"Skip it," snorted Mr. Feathersmith, "and see about that bath." He was relearning his lost youth fast. There had been times when metropolitan flunkyism had annoyed him, but he would give something for some of it now. He pulled out a dime and gave it to the boy, who promptly shuffled out for a conference with the maid over the unheard-of demand of a bath on Friday afternoon.

One look at the bathroom was enough. It was twenty feet high, too,

but only eight feet long by three wide, so that it looked like the bottom of a dark well. A single carbon filament lamp dangled from a pair of black insulated wires, led across the ceiling, and gave a dim orange light—as did the similar one in the bedroom. The bathtub was a tin affair, round-bottomed and standing on four cast-iron legs. It was dirty, and fed by a half-inch pipe that dribbled a pencil-thin stream of water. In about two hours, Mr. Feathersmith estimated, his bath would be drawn and ready—provided, of course, that the maid should remove in the meantime the mass of buckets, pans, brooms, mops and scrub rags that she stored in the place. One glance at the speckled, choked other piece of plumbing in the place made him resolve he would use the gadget underneath his own washstand.

"I kin bring hot water—a pitcher ur so," suggested the colored boy, "ef you want it."

"Never mind," said Mr. Feathersmith. He remembered now that a barber shop was just around the corner and they had bathtubs as well. It would be easier to go there, since he needed a shave, anyway, and pay an extra quarter and get it over with.

He slept in his new bed that night and found it warm despite the frigidness of the room, for the blankets of the time were honest wool and thick. But it was the only crumb of comfort he could draw from his new surroundings.

The next morning Mr. Feathersmith's troubles truly began. He got up, broke the crust of ice in his pitcher, and gaspingly washed his face and hands. He waited tediously for the slow-motion elevator to come up and take him down to breakfast. That meal was inedible, too, owing to its heaviness. He marveled that people could eat so much so early in the morning. He managed some oatmeal and buttered toast, but passed up all the rest. He was afraid that grapefruit was unheard of; as to the other fruits, there were apples. Transportation and storage had evidently not solved the out-of-season fruit and vegetable problem.

It also worried him that Satan had done nothing so far about his rejuvenation. He got up the same gnarled, veiny hands, florid face, and bald head. He wished he had insisted on a legible copy of the contract at the time, instead of waiting for the promised confirmation copy. But all that was water over the dam. He was here, so, pending other developments, he must see about establishing his daily comforts and laying the foundation for his fortune.

There were several things he wanted: to acquire the old Feathersmith homestead; to marry Daisy Norton; to bring in the Cliffordsville oil field—wasn't there already Spindletop, Batson and Sour Lake making millions?—then go back to New York, where, after all, there was a civilization of a sort, however primitive.

He took them in order. Representing himself as a granduncle of his original self, he inquired at the local real-estate man's office. Yes, the Feathersmith place was for sale—cheap. The former cook, Anna, was living near it and available for hire. It did not take Mr. Feathersmith long to get to the local livery stable and hire a two-horse rig to take him out there.

The sight of the place was a shock to him. The road out was muddy in stretches, and rocky and bumpy in others. At last they came to a sagging plank gate in a barbed-wire fence and the driver dragged it open. The great trees Mr. Feathersmith had looked back on with fond memory proved to be post oaks and cedars. There was not a majestic elm or pecan tree in the lot. The house was even more of a disappointment. Instead of the vast mansion he remembered, it was a rambling, run-down building whose porches sagged and where the brown remnants of last summer's honeysuckle still clung to a

tangle of cotton strings used for climbers. They should have a neat pergola built for them, he thought, and entered.

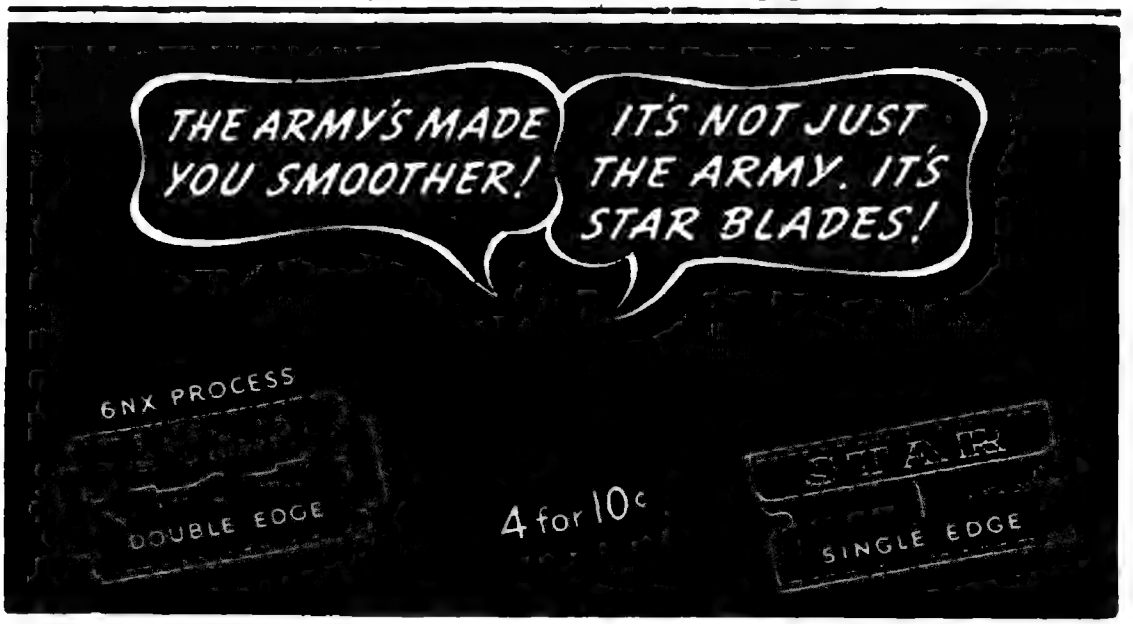
The interior was worse. One room downstairs had a fireplace. Upstairs there was a single sheet-iron wood stove. What furniture that was left was incredibly tawdry; there was no telephone and no lights except kerosene wick lamps. The house lacked closets or a bath, and the back yard was adorned with a crazy Chic Sale of the most uninviting pattern. A deserted hog-pen and a dilapidated stable completed the assets. Mr. Feathersmith decided he wouldn't live there again on any terms.

But a wave of sentimentality drove him to visit Anna, the former cook. She, at least, would not have depreciated like the house had done in a paltry two years. He learned she lived in a shack close by, so he went. He introduced himself as an elder of the Feathersmith family, and wanted to know if she would cook and wash for him.

"I doan want no truck with any kind of Feathersmith," she asserted. "They're po' white trash—all of 'em. The ole man and the missus wan't so bad, but that young skunk of a Jack sold out before they was hardly cold and snuck outa town twixt sundown and daylight an' we ain't never seed ur heard tell of him since. Jus'. let me alone—that's all I ask."

With that she slammed the cabin door in his face.

So! thought Mr. Feathersmith. Well, he guessed he didn't want her, either. He went back to town and straight to the bank. Having discovered he had three thousand dollars in big bills and gold, a sizable fortune for Cliffordsville of the period, since the First National Bank was capitalized for only ten, he went boldly in to see Mr. Norton. He meant to suggest that they jointly exploit the Norton plantations for the oil that was under it. But on the very moment he was entering the portals of the bank he suddenly remembered that the Cliffordsville field was a very recent once, circa 1937, and therefore deep. Whereas Spindletop had been discovered by boring shallow wells—a thousand feet and mostly less—later-day wells had depths of something over a mile. In 1902 the suggestion of drilling to six thousand feet and more would have been simply fantastic. There was neither the equipment nor the men to



undertake it. Mr. Feathersmith gulped the idea down and decided instead to make a deposit and content himself with polite inquiries about the family. . .

Mr. Norton was much impressed with the other's get-up and the cash deposit of three thousand dollars. That much currency was not to be blinked at in the days before the Federal Reserve Board Act. When money stringencies came—and they did often—it was actual cash that counted, not that ephemeral thing known as credit. He listened to Mr. Feathersmith's polite remarks and observed that he would consider it an honor to permit his wife and daughter to receive the new depositor at their home. Personally fingering the beloved bank notes, Mr. Norton ushered out his new customer with utmost suavity.

The call was arranged, and Mr. Feathersmith put in his appearance at exactly 4:30 p. m. of the second day following. Ransacking his mind for memories of customs of the times, he bethought himself to take along a piece of sheet music, a pound of mixed candies, and a bouquet of flowers.

The visit was a flop. Befitting his new status as an important depositor, he took a rubber-tired city hack to the door, and then, to avoid the charge of sinful extravagance, he dismissed the fellow, telling him to come back at five. After that, bearing his gifts, he maneuvered the slippery pathway of pop bottles planted neck down, bordered by bricks and desiccated rosebushes. He mounted the steps and punched the doorbell. After that there was a long silence, but he knew that there was tittering inside and that several persons pulled the curtains softly and surveyed him surreptitiously.—At length the door opened cautiously and an old black mammy dressed in silk to match let him in and led him into the parlor.

It was a macabre room, smelling of mold. She seated him in a horsehair-covered straight chair, then went about the business of opening the inside folding blinds. After that she flitted from the room. After a long wait Mrs. Norton came in, stately and dignified, and introduced herself. Whereupon she plumped herself down on another chair and stared at him. A few minutes later the giggling Daisy came in and was duly introduced. She also bowed stiffly, without offering a hand, and sat down. Then came the grandmother. After that they just sat—the man at one end of the room, and the three sedate women in a row at the other, their knees and ankles tightly compressed together and their hands folded in their laps. Mr. Feathersmith got up and tried to manage a courtly bow while he made his presentations, thinking they were awfully stuffy.

He thought so particularly, because he had formerly had Daisy out on a buggy ride and knew what an expert kisser she could be when the moon was right. But things were different. He introduced various possible topics of conversation, such as the weather, the latest French styles, and so forth. But they promptly—and with the utmost finality—disposed of each with a polite, agreeing "Yes, sir." It was maddening. And then he saw that Daisy Norton was an empty-headed little doll who could only giggle, kiss, as required, and say, "Yes, sir." She had no conception of economics, politics, world affairs—

"Aw-r-rk!" thought Mr. Feathersmith. The thought took him back to those hellcats of modern women—like Miss Tomlinson, in charge of his Wall Street office force—the very type he wanted to get away from, but who was alert and alive.

He listened dully while Daisy played a "Valse Brilliante" on the black square piano, and saw the embroideries her fond mother displayed. After that he ate the little cakes and coffee they brought. Then left. That was Daisy Norton. Another balloon pricked.

On the trip back to the hotel he was upset by seeing a number of yellow flags hung out on houses. It puzzled him at

first, until he remembered that that was the signal for smallpox within. It was another thing he had forgotten about the good old days. They had smallpox, yellow fever, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and other assorted diseases that raged without check except constitutional immunity. There was the matter of typhoid, too, which depended on water and milk supply surveillance. And it came to him that so long as Satan chose to keep him aged, he must live chiefly on milk. Cliffordsville, he well remembered, annually had its wave of typhoid, what with its using unfiltered creek water and the barbarian habit of digging wells in the vicinity of cesspools. Mr. Feathersmith was troubled. Didn't he have enough physical complaints as it was?

He was reminded even more forcibly of that shortly afterward when he came to, sitting up on the floor of a barroom with someone forcing whiskey into his mouth.

"You fainted, mister, but you'll be all right now."

"Get me a doctor," roared Mr. Feathersmith. "It's ephedrine I want, not whiskey!"

The doctor didn't come. There was only the one, and he was out miles in the country administering to a case of "cramp colic"—a mysterious disease later to achieve the more fashionable notoriety of "acute appendicitis." The patient died, unhappily, but that did not bring the doctor back to town any quicker.

The next morning Mr. Feathersmith made a last desperate effort to come back. There was a bicycle mechanic in town who had recently established a garage in order to take care of Mr. Norton's lumbering Ford and Dr. Simpson's buggylike Holtzmann. Those crude automobiles thought it a triumph to make ten miles without a tow, had to be cranked by hand, and were lighted at night by kerosene carriage lamps or acetylene bicycle lamps.

"Why not devise a self-starter," suggested Mr. Feathersmith, recalling that millions had been made out of them, "a gadget you press with the foot, you know, that will crank the engine with an electric motor?"

"Why not wings?" asked the surly mechanic. He did not realize that both were practical, or that Mr. Feathersmith had seen better days. The trouble with Mr. Feathersmith was that he had always been a promoter and a financier, with little or no knowledge of the mechanical end of the game.

"It works," he insisted solemnly, "a storage battery, a motor, and a gil-hookey to crank the motor. Think it over. It would make us rich."

"So would perpetual motion," answered the garage man.

And that was that.

Dr. Simpson, when contact was made, was even a poorer consolation.

"Ephedrine? Digitalis? Vitamins? Thyroxin? You're talking gibberish—I don't know what you mean. Naturally, a man of your age is likely to get short of breath at times—even faint. But shucks, Mr. Feathersmith, don't let that bother you. I've known men to live to a hundred that didn't stack up as well as you. Take it easy, rest plenty with a nap every afternoon, and you'll be all right. We're only young once, you know."

When Mr. Feathersmith found that the good doctor had nothing to offer better than a patented "tonic" and poultices for his rheumatism, he thereafter let him strictly alone. The situation as to vitamins and glandular extracts was worse than hopeless—the dieticians had not got around yet to finding out about calories, let alone those. Mr. Feathersmith worried more and more over Satan's inexplicable delay in bestowing youth befitting the age, for Forfin had insisted the Old Boy would fulfill his promise if the price was paid. But until that was done, the old financier could only wait and employ his time as profitably as he could.

He kept ransacking his brains for things he could invent, but every avenue proved to be a blind alley. He mentioned the possibility of flying to the circle that sat about the lobby stove, but they scornfully laughed it down. It was an obvious impossibility, except for the dirigible gas bags Santos-Dumont was playing with in France. He tried to organize a company to manufacture aluminum, but unfortunately no one had heard of the stuff except one fellow who had been off to school and seen a lump of it in the chemical laboratory. It was almost as expensive as gold, and what good was it?

Mr. Feathersmith realized then that if he was in possession of a 1942 automobile no one could duplicate it, for the many alloys were unknown and the foundry and machine-shop practice necessary were undeveloped. There was nothing to paint it with but carriage paint—slow-drying and sticky. There were no fuels or lubricants to serve it, or any roads fit to run it on.

He played with other ideas, but they all came croppers. He dared not even mention radio—it smacked too much of magic—or lunacy. And he most certainly did not want to be locked up as a madman in an insane asylum of the era. If standard medicine was just beginning to crawl, psychiatry was simply nonexistent. So he kept quiet about his speculations.

Since life had become so hard and he was cut off from any normal intercourse with his fellow townsmen, he yearned for good music. But, alas, that likewise was not to be had outside one or two metropolitan orchestras. He went once to church and heard a home-grown, self-taught soprano caterwaul in a quavering voice. After that he stayed away. He caught himself wishing for a good radio program—and he had altered considerably his standards of what was good.

A week rolled by. During it he had another stroke that was almost his last. The New York doctor had warned him that if he did not obey all the rules as to diet and other palliatives, he might expect to be taken off at any time. Mr. Feathersmith knew that his days were numbered—and the number was far fewer than it would have been if he had remained in the modern age he thought was so unbearable. But still there was the hope that the Devil would yet do the right thing by him.

That hope was finally and utterly blasted the next day. Mr. Feathersmith was in the grip of another devastating fit of weakness and knew that shortly he would be unable to breathe and would therefore fall into a faint and die. But just before his last bit of strength and speck of consciousness faded, there was a faint plop overhead and an envelope fluttered down and into his lap. He looked at it, and though the stamp and cancellation were blurred and illegible, he saw the return address in the corner was "Bureau of Complaints and Adjustments, Gehenna." His trembling fingers tore the missive open. A copy of his contract fell out into his lap.

He scanned it hurriedly. As before, it seemed flawless. Then he discovered a tiny memorandum clipped to its last page. He read it and knew his heart would stand no more. It was from the cute little witch of Fifth Avenue.

DEAREST SNOOKY-WOOKY:

His Nibs complains you keep on bellyaching. That's not fair. You said you wanted to be where you are, and there you are. You wanted your memory unimpaired. Can we help it if your memory is lousy? And not once, old dear, did you cheep about also having your youth restored. So that lets us out. Be seeing you in Hell, old thing.

Cheerio!

He stared at it with fast-dimming eyes.

"The little witch . . . the bad, badgering little—" and then an all-engulfing blackness saved him from his mumbling alliteration.

THE END.

A Bargain In Bodies

by Moses Schere

The burden wasn't visible—but it was evident none the less. The townspeople had a cat, and a stroke of luck, and a chance to free him of that burden none but he could see—

Illustrated by Isip

The man who stumbled into the Paleyville general store was hunched far over, his long lean body a bow of fatigue. Sweat had caked the dust on his face. His lips worked in a gray dirty film. His eyes were slits of hunted agony. Another man, slim, cool and elegantly dressed, came up behind him, waited with an air of amused patience for him to pass through the doorway.

Miss Thomkin, the store's proprietress, stared from her rocking chair in growing horror. For the stooped man obviously carried something—carried it with one hand wrenched around to hold the burden on his back—and it was the burden which stooped him, the burden which had worn illimitable tiredness into his gray-stubbled face.

But the burden was invisible.

The stooped man rasped out words—cracked, almost incoherent. "Give me beer—soda—anything!"

Miss Thomkin's knitting rolled to the floor as she looked around wildly. Outside, beyond the other, dapper man, she saw Pop Forge, the town loafer, and Marty Hulburt, the constable the township paid for loafing, approach through the dreary heat of that August dog day. She jumped up, ran with her quick motions like some bespectacled middle-aged bird to the soda cooler, grabbed the first bottle, opened it, held it out—and dropped it with a terrified squeal. For the burdened man had dropped his burden and it had hit the floor with a soft heavy thud, like a sack of sand. But even then the man did not straighten. He bent low, keeping hold of the invisible thing. He snatched the draining bottle from the floor, sucked it dry in an instant.

"Another!" he gasped, muddy rivulets of soda draining down his chin.

Meanwhile his companion, who had politely moved aside to make way for Constable Hulburt, looked on in continued amusement. He was an exceedingly dapper man in a high-crowned gray derby, fawn-gray double-breasted suit, gray spats, and his hands flashed

with rings. His face was oddly white and smooth, his small eyes very black and shining. His mouth, Miss Thomkin thought with a queer fascination, as she tore her gaze from the man who knelt on the floor by an invisible thing, drinking soda—his mouth was the coldest, straightest, most bloodless line she ever had seen on the face of a human being.

He spoke, now, a pointed tongue showing in serpentine flicks, his voice light and pleasant: "How do you do, madam? We are new to Paleyville. We have come to take possession of Dr. Burleigh's old house." He bowed gracefully.

"Oh—" said Miss Thomkin, backing off. Then, taking courage from Marty Hulburt's truculent glare—and likewise from a very black, ferociously male cat named Toby who marched out from behind the counter, stilted and suspicious—she added, "We . . . we'd heard that it had been bought by a scientist. A Mr. Oliver."

With his foot, the dapper man touched the man near the floor. The action was approximately that of one who kicks a prostrate foe. "This is Mr. Oliver. Say 'how-de-do' to the lady, Oliver, old boy."

The dusty, terribly tired man said nothing. He glanced at the other with an expression of helpless hate, then turned his face again toward the invisible burden which held his right hand within a few inches of the floor. Then—he leaned on the thing. It appeared to give somewhat, supporting his reclining elbow flexibly some eight or nine inches in clear air.

Constable Hulburt's blurry, beefy voice gulped, "What's *that?*"

"Oh?" said the dapper man. "That's only Mr. Ames. Well, Oliver, old boy? I'm not in any hurry, but there's the promise of rain, probably a thunderstorm by nightfall."

Mr. Oliver gasped harshly, "I want a taxi—or a farm wagon—or anything—to take me up to the Burleigh house—and I'll pay well."

"And he will, truly," observed the dapper man, looking at his long, beautifully manicured nails. "Ah, yes! A wealthy man, our Mr. Oliver."

Pop Forge, who had been hovering behind the constable's broad back, spoke up quaveringly. "My son's comin' along with his wagon."

"Five dollars," id the man near the floor. "Tell him." His breath was coming more easily, he looked with yearning at all the ordinary things of the general store—the rack of brooms, the yard goods, the candy counter, the grocery shelves. And he looked, finally, straight at Miss Thomkin.

The dapper man now became interested in Toby and began to pursue him, apparently with the intention of petting; but Toby arched and spat. Constable Hulburt hitched up his gun belt and said, "Say, looka here—" several times. But Miss Thomkin did not notice either. Her lips parted, a slight flush on her thin face, she returned the regard of the man who leaned on his invisible burden.

This man had once been handsome; his features, now sunk in lines of dirt and fatigue, and blighted with a nameless terror, were heavy but well-formed, and his eyes under their shaggy half-gray brows were widely intelligent. He seemed to plead with her silently, then he began to speak. He would, he said, require some food while up at the old Burleigh place, though he didn't know how long he'd stay there. He hoped to avail himself of the facilities of her well-stocked store.

He glanced around once. The dapper man, his back toward them, had cornered Toby and was working the animal into a nervous breakdown. Still speaking—about the hot weather—the burdened man slipped a piece of folded paper from his sweat-stained vest, held it up beseechingly to Miss Thomkin. She gasped, but took it quickly. "And

as for this"—Mr. Oliver indicated the invisible thing on the floor—"pray don't be alarmed, madam. It's harmless."

The dapper man turned, sniggering, "Oh, quite! Not a corpse. No murder, eh, old boy?"

"Ames is not a corpse!" Mr. Oliver grated.

"Precisely what I said," murmured the other. Then. Toby having spat at him, he carefully spat at Toby's whiskers.

There was a rumble of wagon wheels and Forge's son arrived, came in, looked at the thing his quavering father pointed out, did not see it, gulped, had turned and gone out fast when Oliver snarled, "Ten dollars, you fool! But get me to the Burleigh house—I can see it on the hill—before the storm comes up."

Restrained by his father, the younger Forge waited, ghastly under his deep tan. Oliver shouldered his burden again; he rolled the invisible thing onto his shoulders, grunting and straining, the sweat standing out anew and running in channels down his dirty, gaunt face. "Steady does it, old boy!" said the dapper man cheerily, while he flicked a speck of dust from his immaculate suit. Oliver gave one imploring glance to Miss Thomkin as he staggered through the door. Everyone heard the burden scrape the door jamb. Then, in the soft dust alongside Oliver, marks appeared, grew long. They were marks exactly as would be made by fingers trailing in the dust. The dapper man stepped forward and lifted something out of the way, appeared to tuck something in alongside the burden. "Now, now, mustn't get your old pal dirty!"

Oliver heaved the thing over the tailboard of young Forge's wagon, his right hand following it. Relieved of at least its weight, he tried to straigten himself, groaned at the pain in his long limbs, finally climbed in and leaned again upon the burden in silent despair. His well-dressed companion leaped up athletically upon the seat, from which young Forge, pallid, tried to control his horses.

"Good day for the present, gentlemen, madam. My friend Mr. Oliver is likely to be a good customer of yours, madam. He will need quantities of strength-giving foods. Ah, yes! But none for me." His mouth curled up at the corners while the rest remained impossibly straight. "I don't eat at all, you see, old girl."

Oliver suddenly roused. "He's a demon! A demon!"

"Ah, yes!" said the dapper man cheerfully. "To be sure, old boy, I am." Lithely he stood up on the wagon's seat and lifted his gray bowler. Miss Thomkin, Marty Hulburt and Pop Forge gulped simultaneously, while young Forge shuddered, closed his eyes, shuddered, opened them again, closed them, kept them closed and kept shuddering. Rising from the dapper man's shiny black hair were two short, ivory horns, inward-curving so that they fitted nicely under his hat.

The demon bowed mockingly, turned his back. Along the center line of his close-fitting jacket appeared a series of moving bumps. Then out of the jacket collar poked the pointed end of his tail, which he waved once, slipped back and settled, apparently, by wrapping it around his waist inside his clothes. "Ah, yes!" he said, turning once more. "Yes, indeed!" He beamed upon them all. With a negligent motion he drew from his jacket pocket a small object like an egg sliced down in longitudinal axis—a reddish-gleaming, translucent thing, save for a silver burnishing on the flat side. However, even this flat side gave forth an orange glow. He looked at this flat side, polished it upon his sleeve, looked at it again, then tossed the object several times into the air as though passing the time till young Forge should open his eyes. "Well, old boy? Shall we be off before the rain catches us?" Young Forge looked away, opened his eyes, and, with hands that acted as

though they had been dipped into plaster of Paris, gathered his reins. "Come now!" said the demon genially. "I beg of you all, don't be disturbed by my . . . ah . . . other-wordliness. My friend Mr. Oliver, here, is the only one who has to beware of me. I'm not His Satanic Majesty, you know, only a sub-lieutenant. Call me Nicky—won't you?"

Young Forge said, "G-g-g-g-gid-dup!" to his nervous horses and the wagon began to roll toward the gray stone pile of the old Burleigh house, which could just be made out at the top of a steep hill, behind its overgrown orchard.

The demon bowed to Miss Thomkin, sat down. Then he leaped up, as though he had forgotten something. "Oliver, old boy," he chortled, "look. This slays 'em." Balanced on the wagon seat, he placed the heel of his elegantly gleaming right shoe upon the very edge of the seat and with his left shoe stepped upon his own toe. More than half of the right shoe bent backward. "Do you see?" called Nicky in his clear, high voice. "The shoe is not filled as though I had toes and an instep. Observe the rounded edge of the member showing through the leather . . . plain, eh? And now the other . . . you observe? Ah, yes, if I wear out my shoes I can always borrow from one of the horses!"

With an air of being greatly pleased at his own wit, Nicky sat down beside young Forge—who moved so far toward the other end of the seat that he practically sat on air—and, tossing the translucent, glowing split egg from hand to hand, began to whistle Saint-Saens' *"La Danse Macabre"* with many affected frills and flourishes.

The wagon disappeared around the curve of the road. The last thing the watchers saw was Oliver, in the wagon's bed, heaving himself almost upright, straining up from his terrible burden to hold out his free hand beseechingly.

"Say, looka here—" Constable Hulburt mumbled. "Looka here—"

But Miss Thomkin had scurried inside her store. Her heart beat high. That last pathetic plea, she knew, had been meant for her. Locked in the back room, she unfolded the bit of paper which Oliver had given her.

It was a message written in pencil on a page torn from a small notebook. The haste of the writing did not conceal the decisive form of the letters, the heavy down strokes of—Miss Thomkin thought—a man of character.

I shall give this note to the first man with strength of will whom I meet Paleyville. I am under a curse. I have access to great riches. Help me and they shall be yours. The person with me is a demon from hell. If no one can help me, he will stay with me till I die under the curse of my burden. He cannot be harmed by any save Satan, his master. Do not touch him. His power over me resides in the bell-mirror he carries. It is shaped like the half of an egg, red, one side like a mirror. This is the badge of office which Satan has given him for the duration of his job. Without it he is helpless. Take it from him and I may be able to free myself from my burden. But it cannot be taken from him by force or stealth. It must be snatched by something which cannot be harmed by the power of darkness. There is a book ca—

Here the message ended abruptly.

Miss Thomkin slowly folded the paper. She trembled with a sensation she had not felt for twenty years.

At twenty-five, she had been about to marry. She went with her fiancé to a traveling show. There had been a face—a singing, smiling face framed in golden curls, with pretty, stupid baby-blue eyes—

He had followed the face out of Paleyville and away forever from her life.

The beauty still remaining in Miss Thomkin's features—beauty which now, rather, was stateliness—bloomed again as she read once more the desperate plea on the crumpled page. She read again, "I shall give this note to the first man with strength of will whom I meet—"

But he'd chosen a woman. Chosen a woman because, perhaps, he, too, had

felt something quiver in his breast when their eyes first met. Chosen a women, perhaps, to answer the lonesomeness which dwelt upon his handsome, so terribly ravaged features.

Slowly Miss Thomkin tucked the letter into the bosom of her sober dark dress. She went out into the store and rummaged among her meager beauty supplies for a lipstick.

The first thunderstorm that evening skirted the edge of the rim of hills around Paleyville, sending only a spatter of rain into the valley. But behind it a horde of heat-spawned cumuli came tumbling on in the beginning of a wild night of thunder and lightning.

Mr. Oliver, bowed under his burden, stood in the old Burleigh laboratory, panting and deathly weary. This was a large basement room having some chemical and electrical apparatus interlarded with strange symbols, circles, inscriptions in every ancient language from Sumerian to Gothic runes. At the center of the room was a vast bell jar beneath which a man could sit. Thick wires in a sturdy insulation were let into it by platinum leads, ascended out again and up through the ceiling. Nicky, who wandered with the air of a bored spectator, rubbed a finger in the heavy dust, carefully wiped off the stain with the tip of his tail. He had released his tail from it doubtless cramping confinement, and it whipped about handsomely.

Under the bell jar was a dusting of ashes, among which lay such fused metal objects as tooth fillings and cuff links. These were Dr. Burleigh's remains.

"Old boy's in reduced circumstances," Nicky tittered.

Dr. Burleigh had experimented with the ego. So had Mr. Oliver. They had corresponded, though neither had given the other any secrets. When Burleigh's shaken old servant had come to Oliver and told of the ashes in the bell jar, Oliver had paid the man well to say that Burleigh had gone traveling and sold his house. The servant himself then went traveling, considerably more shaken after having seen Mr. Oliver and not seeing Mr. Oliver's burden. Thus, Mr. Oliver found himself possessed of a uniquely equipped laboratory in which he hoped to finish five years of desperate experimentation.

Nicky peered out through a cobwebbed window. "More lightning soon, I'd say."

"Then for Heaven's sake, will you get out of here *this once?*"

After evening chores, an excited group gathered in the Paleyville general store. Constable Hulburt, Pop Forge, young Forge and—more reluctantly—Miss Thomkin told what they had seen, over and over again, into a haze of tobacco smoke.

"H-horn!" quavered Pop Forge. "Wh-white as a hound's tooth."

Young Forge: "Listen, I was sittin' next to him all the way up the hill and he's cold, I tell you; colder'n ice. I'm still shiverin' . . . I'm gonna drink. I gotta drink or I'll never sleep till I'm in my grave! And this man in back, he's carryin', carryin', carryin', carryin'—" They found applejack for young Forge. "On his shoulders—must weigh five hundred, a thousand pounds and nothing there; you can't see it . . . and when he gave me the ten bucks I thought something *touched* me from that thing on his back that he carries, carries, carries, carries—" He got the neck of the jug deep into his mouth.

And Miss Thomkin: "No, he didn't take off his shoes. You could see a round edge to his foot, and it was quite short. But I don't *say* it was a hoof."

While Constable Hulburt: "Say . . . say, looka here—I wanna know who gets arrested. What law's broke? What? Fella doesn't appeal to the law . . he seen my badge. . I wanna know! And I tell you, I seen that tail!"

"Want to see it again, old boy?"

asked Nicky, who walked in at that moment. Maneuvering his tail up the back of his jacket—he had wrapped it carefully around his waist again—he laid its pointed end under his pearl-gray derby so that he lifted his hat right off his head. There were the horns, shining in the light of the kerosene lanterns. "Make no doubt about it, ladies and gentlemen! I am a demon!" He strolled across the general store through a pall of silence, and, uninvited, twisted the dial of Miss Thomkin's little radio, which stood on a corner of the counter. "Time for a news broadcast, and it *is* the most gorgeous war, don't you think?" He listened attentively, his head cocked to one side. "Ah, yes, yes, another battleship lost with all hands in the Pacific. My pals will be having a time! However, can't say I'm sorry to be off on special duty, consorting with mortals for a change." He inspected them all—Miss Thomkin, Constable Hulburt, old Forge—young Forge had dived into the back room—and a knot of farmers with a few horrified, fascinated farmers' wives. "Mortals," said Nicky, his cold lips twisting. He might have said, "Worms." He took the hell-mirror from his pocket,

spun it up with a play of orange light, looked at the mirror side, said, "Ah, yes," and then, catching sight of Toby crouching on the other side of the cold stove, he suddenly leaped atop the stove and spat accurately into Toby's whiskers. As though nothing had occurred, he resumed his stance by the radio, toying with the hell-mirror and looking at the assemblage in bored disdain.

"Ah, yes, madam," he said finally. "I gave Mr. Oliver plenty of chance to deliver his *billet-doux*—that is, his letter."

"Why do you torture him so?" Miss Thomkin cried.

"Torture him? My dear lady, one has one's job to do! Ah, look here, if you please." He held out the split reddish egg, burnished side forward, so that all the gaping crowd might see.

There, in miniature, moving on a silver surface in an orange light, was a perfect television picture of Mr. Oliver. He carried his invisible burden; his steps were six inches long, dragging, weary. He was making some electrical connections atop the huge bell jar.

Pop Forge, who had once done some odd jobs for Dr. Burleigh, said, "Th-that's Burleigh's laboratory, all right!"

"Ah, to be sure, old boy," Nicky agreed. "And there is friend Oliver preparing for the advent of the thunderstorm now sweeping into our vicinity. He hopes to avail himself of the energy of lightning to free himself of his burden. Of course," Nicky added softly, looking at Miss Thomkin, "I shall not let him, old girl. It is my job to prevent him—my orders from His Satanic Majesty. I shall leave here in due time, climb to the roof of the Burleigh house and disconnect some vital wire, ruining his experiment. I've been doing things like that for five years."

Miss Thomkin gasped, "Five years! With that burden! Oh, the poor, poor man!"

"He'll be dead in another five, I assure you," said Nicky, with his bow of mocking deference. "His heart is bound to give way—to disappointment, if nothing else! He will then be in my charge in the nether world, where I shall have infinitely better opportunities to use my talents in his behalf. But we sha'n't go into that, shall we, dear lady?"

"In Heaven's name, what is this burden?" Miss Thomkin cried.

Nicky looked at the hell-mirror once more, slid it into his pocket. He peered around one side of the stove, then, quick as a ferret, darted around the other way and kicked outflanked Toby at the base of the tail.

"You'd like the whole story?" said Nicky to the gaping crowd. "Why not?"

He told it boredly, with many interruptions to persecute Toby—who, a-bristle with rage, kept coming back for more. There were as many varying versions of what he said, next day as there were persons crowded into the stifling little store. The gist of his windy and much-interrupted tale was this:

Mr. Oliver was a scientist and an occultist. So had been a Mr. Ames. Ames had been as broad and squat as Oliver was lanky. He had had bristly red hair and wore a beard like a red porcupine wrapped around his chin. A most able man—and dangerous. Both Oliver and Ames were dangerous. They conspired to rule the world.

"Did you ever stop to think, dear oafs," said Nicky, toying with the hell-mirror and shooting malevolent orange reflections into Toby's eyes, "that an individual with the complete intellects and ego of two brilliant men could rule the world? He could instantaneously apply to any problem twice the memory, twice the learning, twice the native ability, the accumulated experience in various fields. It was the plan of Mr. Oliver and Mr. Ames to . . . . ah amalgamate."

Nicky skipped over the details of their

combination of science and occult knowledge "Suffice it to say that they gained the personal attention of His Satanic Majesty—the first mortals to do so since the admirable Gilles de Retz!" For the scheme was black magic. However, they depended on artificial lightning, too, and other scientific concoctions which were very hateful to His Satanic Majesty. They were fonder of phrases like "polarization of ectoplasmic personality" than of the proper charms and stinks. All in all, His Satanic Majesty became very much displeased.

"They drew lots," continued Nicky, "as to which of their bodies should in the future contain the double ego, the double power which would bring rulership of the earth. Counted on chaos following the present war, y'see. And I should say that there was no question of surgery. Nothing so primitive. The proper charms, the proper incense, the proper invocations—we'd thought, down below, that they'd been erased from mortal records—and then, science! An artificial lightning flash! Mr. Andrew Ames was to have disappeared, consumed in the lightning flash—small loss, such a hairy pig of a man—while all his mental and egoistic powers flowed into the brain of Mason Oliver." Nicky sniggered, jumped forward to tread on Toby's tail; Toby left a long scratch on his shining, half-filled shoe. "Now Mr. Oliver knows that he must depend on natural forces, natural lightning. But *it's too late.*"

For Satan, science-insulted, stopped the flow of Ames' ego at the instant of the artificial lightning flash. The body of Ames disappeared from earthly view, but remained in weight, size and texture still Andrew Ames, who weighed two hundred and twenty pounds with his beard. Ames now existed, unconscious, on the last knife-edge brink of total extinction, invisible, as a permanent attachment to Mason Oliver. An ectoplasmic link had been formed from body to body.

"Thus, dear bumpkins, our estimable Mr. Oliver is doomed to carry the invisible, yet weighty, body of Mr. Ames until he dies. He chooses to spend his time in experiments looking toward freeing himself of this burden. But I have my instructions. The old boy's experiments is not to succeed; he is *not* to be free." Nicky looked into the hell-mirror with a whimsical twist of his straight, bloodless lips. "Ah, yes, Oliver's almost ready for the lightning. I must go up and ruin things. You see, the devil doesn't like dictators."

Miss Thomkin gulped, "But—"

"But me no buts, my good woman," said Nicky. He made a threatening gesture toward Toby, who this time stood his ground, bristling into a ball of fur. "My master allows each dictator to go just so far before ruining himself. Consider Napoleon. Consider Hitler—you'll see. The devil, madam, does not want the world ruled by one man whose power would then, indeed, challenge his own! This, it can do no harm to tell you, is at the basis of His Satanic Majesty's dislike for the Oliver-Ames scheme of mentality amalgamation. Oliver-Ames—" Nicky spun the hell-mirror. "Good evening, dear rustics. I should prefer to stay awhile to hear your bucolic chatter, but I really must toddle up the hill to disappoint our Mr. Oliver. One has one's job."

Nicky strode to the door. But apparently he could not resist Toby. He stopped, knelt on one knee—the shoe he put behind him bending up horribly—and in wheedling tones began to call to the big black cat, "Here, Toby, Toby, nice Toby." He played the orange reflections of the hell-mirror over the floor in dancing patterns. Toby put out a tentative paw to flick the elusive distorted ellipse of light, moved a fluid catstep nearer—

Having Toby in range, Nicky spat into his whiskers.

A snarl zoomed upward into a feline scream. A black flash tipped by a red-

and-white mouth hit Nicky hard—so hard that a scintillating bit of red and silver rolled across the floor. Nicky flung the spitting, berserk cat in one direction, flung himself the other way to get the hell-mirror.

Miss Thomkin snatched it up. She stood there panting, staring into it, blood suffusing her thin face.

Nicky had lost his bowler. His horns gleamed as he lifted his right hand slowly, definitely, and smiled. The smile was like a crack appearing in a block of ice which instantly, then, congealed. "Black cats," said Nicky softly, "are immune to black magic. Unfortunately," he added, "*you* cannot see anything in a hell-mirror that a mortal holds. It's useless to you." Then, cracking the words, "Give it to me!"

"No," said Miss Thomkin.

The demon—for the personality, Nicky, was gone—clenched his hands. All the townsfolk, pressed against the walls, swore later that they saw him tremble, saw fear come over him visibly."

"Please. I beg of you. Before it's ruined by mortal contact."

"I'm very sorry," said Miss Thomkin. "Indeed I am. It's your property. But I won't give it back to you unless you release Mr. Oliver."

The demon stood there, his shoulders bowed, his black eyes dulled. He spoke as though to someone far away, and the fear in his voice was ghastly. "I can't take it from her, you know. She has to give it to me. Compulsion only upon stated victims—" Then he listened. You could hear Toby, who had fallen into a cracker barrel upon which someone thoughtfully had closed the lid, tearing at the staves and cursing hard. You could hear the storm making outside. But the demon heard something else.

He straightened and said more calmly to Miss Thomkin, "A bargain, now, old girl. Ah, yes, a bargain. We can enforce bargains. I allow Mr. Oliver to experiment unmolested tonight, and you return my hell-mirror to me."

Miss Thomkin's hands were growing white. Those near her felt the supernatural chill of the object she held. But she held it firmly, said, "I am not to be deceived by this—person. You will have to promise that Mr. Oliver's experiment will succeed, or you do not get this h— . . . this h— . . . this object from Hades!"

The demon regarded the hell-mirror with concentrated attention. He said carefully, "I agree that tonight, before midnight, Mr. Mason Oliver will be rid of the burden he now carries, namely, the invisible body of Mr. Andrew Ames."

Miss Thomkin said quietly, "Not enough."

"My dear lady!" the demon protested. Then, with a sound almost like a moan, he glanced down fearfully be-

tween his shining shoes.

Meanwhile his tail had come unwound, dribbled down one trouser leg so that several feet of it lay limply on the floor. There was an almost imperceptible, distant deep muttering which might have come from the storm—or might have been the echo of a vast roar of rage in the heart of the earth.

"Not enough," Miss Thomkin repeated, though her hand was going white to the wrist. "What about that other man, poor Mr. Ames?"

"Atta girl!" came from the crowd. "That's tellin' the rat." "No appeasement."

The demon's horns cut the lamplight as he bowed. "I agree further that Mr. Ames shall be restored to full life."

The demon put on his hat, went to the door, and, in attempting to lift the gray bowler with the tip of his tail, discovered his tail's disarray. Defeated, he clamped the hat hard over his horns. "I shall come down the hill with Mr. Oliver *and* Mr. Ames before midnight," he said harshly. "I shall deliver them both to the door, here, and when I do, our bargain is complete." He looked down between his shoes and they saw him tremble again. "Keep the hell-mirror here. Don't walk around with it. You'll ruin it. Please." Snatching up his tail, the demon ran up the hill through the rain.

In the three hours which passed, Miss Thomkin seemed to grow five years younger. For one thing, the hell-mirror was losing its potency, no longer numbing her hand as it colors dimmed; it grew less terribly cold. And in her heart the warmth increased. He would be grateful. He would know she had acted intelligently, acted as well as any man of strong will. But she was a woman. And now he would be so tired, so grateful for her ministrations. And later—

The air was full of wild electricity and crashing thunder. One great forked bolt caught the old Burleigh house, danced upon its lightning rods a full three seconds, limned itself starkly upon the retinas of all who watched; for those three seconds they heard a roaring in the earth. Then the storms drew off. Heavy rain fell, churning the dust into mud. By eleven forty, it stopped raining. The air was very still—

Someone—more than one person—was coming down the hill.

"We'll wait," said Miss Thomkin, firmly taking charge of the situation. "We'll all wait right here. Don't give him any chance to break the bargain."

A group of uplifted lanterns, held by hard-breathing farmers just outside the door of the general store, formed a wavering circle of light. Slowly, figures approached from the darkness beyond that circle. Those who waited heard a *shuffle—shuffle—shuffle*.

The demon appeared first. He walked rapidly to Miss Thomkin, held out his hand. "The bargain is complete," he said. The hell-mirror was no longer in Miss Thomkin's hand, but in his; how, no one knew.

No one was watching the demon or Miss Thomkin at that moment, for someone else shuffled into the circle of lamplight.

It was a man who walked with slow, dragging steps as he bent double under an invisible weight. A short, broad man in shreds of moldering clothes, one hand wrenched around to hold his unseen burden; his eyes and open mouth were circles of uncomprehending agony in the bristling red hedge of his thick beard and hair. He shuffled, shuffled, shuffled. Behind him in the mud appeared two wavering lines, stopping as he stopped. He swayed, panted, stared, froth dribbling from his mouth into his beard.

Miss Thomkin screamed.

"Oliver has such long legs. Strap them up so that his feet won't drag—shall I, old boy?" said the demon to Mr. Ames.

THE END.

Sriberdegibit

by Anthony Boucher

Never heard of a wimp? Seems they do happen around, and they grant wishes. But it's wise—very wise—to make sure you want the wish you make!

Illustrated by Hall

"May I be eternally cursed!" Gilbert Iles gasped.

The little man with the sketchy fringe of beard made further passes, reached out into the air again, and plunked a second twenty-dollar gold piece down on the bar beside the first.

"It's beautiful," Iles announced solemnly. Hot buttered rum always made him solemn. "I've never seen such prestidigitation in my life. See: I can say 'prestidigitation.' That's what comes of having trained articulation. That's beautiful, too."

The little man smiled. "You're an actor, colleague?" he asked.

"Not officially. I'm a lawyer. I won the Shalgreen will case today; that's why I'm celebrating. Did I tell you about that case?"

"No. Was it interesting?"

"Most interesting. You see, the presumptive heirs— But the hell with that," Gilbert Iles decided with solemn capriciousness. "Show me some more prestidigitation."

The water lapped peacefully at the piles under the bar. The sailor in the corner switched off the table light and let the clear moonshine bathe the blonde opposite him. The radio was turned so low that it was only a murmur. The man with the fringed beard made a peculiarly elaborate pass and ended up with a gold piece balanced on the tip of each of his five outspread fingers.

"May I be eternally cursed!" Iles repeated. Linda objected to strong language; for some reason she permitted *cursed* while damning *damned*. "But gold," he added. "How does that work? Does the government let you keep all that gold because it's a professional tool? Or are they phonies?"

"I know," said the little man sadly. "Laws never make any allowance for magic. And They never make any allowance for laws. I never can convince Them that Their gold isn't any earthly use to me. Oh well—" He made another pass and said a word that seemed to have no vowels. The seven coins on the bar vanished.

"Beautiful," said Gilbert Iles. "I'd like to have you around when the prosecution brings in some unexpected exhibits. How's about another drink on that?"

"No, thank you."

"Come on. I'm celebrating, I am. I can still say 'prestidigitation' because I've got trained articulation but I'm

soaring up and up and up and I want company. Just because Linda stayed home with a headache, do I have to drink alone? No!" he burst forth in thunderous oratorical tones. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, how can you sit there unmoved and behold this rank injustice practiced before your very eyes? Hearts of the hardest stone would melt, thaw and resolve themselves into a dew before—"

His rounded periods drowned out the radio and the lapping of the waves. The sailor looked around, puzzled and belligerent.

"I'm sorry," said the little man. "But I shouldn't ever take more than one. I take two, and things begin to happen. I remember that night in Darjeeling—"

"So—" Gilbert Iles' voice took on the tone of a hectoring cross-examiner. "You remember that? And what else do you remember? Do you remember the pitiful state of this defendant here, parched, insatiate, and driven by your cruelty to take refuge in the vice of solitary drinking? Do you remember—"

The sailor was getting up from his table. The bartender sidled up to the fringe-bearded man. "Look, Mac, if he wants to buy you a drink, O. K., so let him buy it."

"But, colleague, if things happen—"

The bartender glanced apprehensively at the sailor. "Things are going to happen right now if you don't shut him up. Well, gents," he added in louder tones, "what'll it be?"

"Gin and tonic," said the little man resignedly.

"Hot ruttered bum," Gilbert Iles announced rotundly. He heard his own words in the air. "I did that on purpose," he added hastily and unconvincingly.

The other nodded agreeably.

"What's your name?" Iles asked.

"Ozymandias the Great," the prestidigitator said unassumingly.

"Aha! Show business, huh? You're a magician?"

"I was."

"Mm-m-m. I see. Death of vaudeville and stuff?"

"Not just that. The trouble was mostly the theater managers. They kept getting worried."

"Why?"

"They get scared when it's real. They don't like magic unless they know just where the mirrors are. When you tell them there aren't any mirrors—well, half of them don't believe you. The other half tear up the contract."

The drinks came. Gilbert Iles paid for them and sipped his rum while he did an exceedingly slow take. Then, "Real!" he echoed. "No mirrors—May I be—"

"Of course there was some foundation for their worry," Ozymandias went on calmly. "The Darjeeling episode got around. And then there was the time the seal trainer talked me into a second gin and tonic and I decided to try that old spell for calling up a salamander. We wanted to see could we train it to play the 'Star Spangled Banner'; it would have been a socko finale. The fire department got there in time and there was only about a thousand dollars' damage, but after that people kept worrying about me."

"You mean, you are a magician?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"But a magician— When you said you were a magician, I thought you just meant you were a magician. I didn't dream you meant you were a *magician.*"

"Only a white one," said Ozymandias deprecatingly.

"Then those coins— They came from—"

"I don't know just where they come from. You reach out with the proper technique and They give them to you."

"And who are They?"

"Oh—things—you know, colleague."

"I," Gilbert Iles announced "am drunk. What else can you do?"

"Oh, any little odd jobs. Call spirits

from the vasty deep, that kind of thing. Work minor spells. Once"—he smiled—"I taught a man how to be a werewolf of good will. And then"—his round face darkened—"there was that time in Darjeeling—"

"What could you do now to help me celebrate? Could you cure Linda's headache?"

"Not at a distance. Not unless you had something personal of hers—handkerchief, lock of hair? No? The falling off of sentimentality does play the devil with sympathetic magic. You want to celebrate? I could call up a couple of houris I know—nice girls, if a trifle plump—and we—"

Iles shook his head. "No Linda, no houris. I, sir, have a monogamous soul. Monogamous body too, practically."

"Do you like music?"

"Not very."

"Too bad. There's a first-rate spirit band that plays the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music. Let's see; we could—" He snapped his fingers. "Look, you're Taurus, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were born in May?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Something about your aura. Well, how would you like to have a wish granted?"

"Which wish?" said Gilbert Iles. It was not an easy phrase even for trained articulation.

"Any wish. But think it over carefully first. Remember the story about the sausages. Or the monkey's paw. But for the next minute or two you can have any wish granted."

"Why?"

Ozymandias reached into the air and plucked a lighted cigarette. "Be deciding on your wish, because there isn't too much time. Wimps are flighty creatures. And while you're thinking, I'll give you a rough sketch. You see, there's a Taurine wimp in the room."

"A which?"

"A wimp—a wish-imp. You see, if the universe ran strictly according to coherent laws, it would be unchanging. This would be equally dull for God and for man. So there has to be chance and intervention. For instance, there are miracles. But those are important and don't happen every day. So there's the chance element that every man can, quite unconsciously, perform miracles. Haven't you sometimes had the most unlikely wish work out, contrary to all expectations?"

"Once in a thousand times."

"That's about the odds; more would produce chaos. Well, that was because there was a Taurine wimp around. The wimps aren't many; but they constantly wander about among men. When one of them overhears a wish made by a man under his sign, he grants it."

"And it works?"

"It works. If I had only run onto a Sagittarian wimp in Darjeeling—"

Gilbert Iles goggled, and took a long swig of buttered rum. "May I," he said solemnly, "be eternally cursed!"

Ozymandias gasped. "Good heavens! I certainly never expected you to pick a wish like that!"

That slight joggling of the air was the Taurine wimp giggling. It was always delighted by the astonishing involuntary wishes of people. As Puck was forever saying, "What fools these mortals be!" It giggled again and soared away.

Gilbert Iles gulped the rest of his rum. "You mean that . . . that exclamation counted as a wish?"

"It was phrased as one, wasn't it, colleague? May I be— That's the way you make wishes."

"And I am—" Without the buttered rums, the solid legal mind of Iles would have hooted at such a notion; but now it seemed to have an ominous plausibility. "Then I am cursed?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But how? Does it mean that when I die I'll—"

"Oh no. Cursed, not damned. A curse affects you in this life."

"But how?" Iles insisted.

"Should I know? You didn't specify. The wimp probably turned you over to the nearest demon. There's no telling what his specialty is."

"No telling? But you . . . you said you could call spirits from the vasty deep. Can't you call demons and find out about curses?"

"Hm-m-m." Ozymandias hesitated. "I could maybe. But if I made the least mistake and got the wrong kind of demon— Or if— It might even be a curse you'd sooner not know about."

Iles shook his head. "I want to know. A smart lawyer can handle anything. I don't know why curses and demons shouldn't be included."

Ozymandias drained his gin and tonic. "On your own head be it," he said. "Come on."

A mile up the beach you were in a primitive world. There was no light but the moon and no sound but the waves. You were restored to the condition of your first tailless forefather. There was no sign of civilization, only the awesome vastness of nature and its forces. Also you had sand in your shoes and it worried you.

The fringe-bearded little magician had built a pyre of driftwood and sprinkled on it a couple of powders from a case of phials in his pocket. Iles struck a match for him, but it snapped in two. Ozymandias said, "Never mind," and made a pass or two. The driftwood caught fire and burned with the flame of seven colors. Ozymandias said an incantation—not in the ringing and dramatic tones that Iles had expected, but with the casual mutter of any celebrant going through a familiar ritual. The flame leaped high.

And the moon went out.

More precisely, they seemed to be cut off from its rays. They were in a globe of darkness at the core of which glowed the suddenly dying fire. And in that glow sat the demon.

He was of no particular height. It may have been the flicker of the dying flames; it may have been some peculiarity of his own. He kept varying from an apparent height of about two feet to around seven or eight. His shape was not too unlike that of a human being; save of course for the silver-scaled tail. His nails had the sheen of a beetle's carapace. One tusk seemed loose and he had a nervous habit of twanging it. The sound was plaintive.

"Your name?" Ozymandias demanded politely.

"Sriberdegibit." The voice was of average human pitch, but it had an unending resonance, like a voice bouncing about in a cave.

"You are a curse-demon?"

"Sure." The demon espied Iles with happy recognition. "Hi!" he said.

"Hi!" said Gilbert Iles feebly. He was very sober now; he felt regretfully sure of that. And he was soberly seeing a curse-demon, which meant that he was soberly cursed. And he did not even know what the curse was. "Ask him quick," he prodded the magician.

"You have put a curse on my friend here?"

"He asked for it, didn't he?" He looked bored, and twanged his tusk.

"And what is the nature of that curse?"

"He'll find out."

"I command you to tell us."

"Nuts. That's not in my duties."

Ozymandias made a pass. "I command you—"

The demon jumped and rubbed his rump. "That's a fine thing to do!" he said bitterly.

"Want some more?"

"All right. I'll tell you." He paused and twanged. "It was just a plain old curse. Just something we've had lying around since the Murgatroyd family died out. I just took the first one I came to; he didn't seem to care."

"And it was—"

"The curse the witches used to use

on their too virtuous puritan persecutors, remember? It's a nice one. In poetry, too. It goes like this." He twanged his tusk again to get the proper pitch, and then chanted:

"Commit an evil deed each day thou must
Or let thy body crumble into dust.

"Of course," he added, "it doesn't really crumble. That's for the rhyme."

"I've heard of that curse," Ozymandias said thoughtfully. "It's a tricky one in terminology. How have the Upper Courts adjudicated 'evil deed'?"

"Synonymous with sin," said Sriberdegibit.

"Hm-m-m. He must commit a sin each day—'day' meaning?"

"Twelve oh one a. m. till the next midnight starting tomorrow morning."

"He must commit a sin each day or else—"

"Or else," said the demon, with a little more cheerfulness than he had heretofore displayed, "I show up at midnight and strangle him." He coiled his tail into a garroting noose.

"Then you must be always near him to observe his actions and to carry out your duty if he fails. Very well. I lay this further behest upon you: Whenever he says your name, you must appear to him and answer his questions. Now begone!"

"Hey!" the demon protested. "I don't have to do that. It's not in my instructions. I— Yi!" He jumped again and rubbed his rump even more vigorously. "All right. You win."

"Begone!" Ozymandias repeated.

The moon shone bright and clear on the beach and on the embers of a driftwood fire. "Well," said the magician, "now you know."

Gilbert Iles shook himself. Then he pinched himself. Then he said, "I guess I really saw that."

"Of course. And now you know the nature of the curse. What do you think of it, colleague?"

Iles laughed. "I can't say it worries me. It's a cinch. A sin a day—I'm no angel. It'll take care of itself."

Ozymandias frowned and stared at the embers. "I'm glad you think so," he said slowly.

Gilbert Iles was always hard to wake up. He was especially so the next morning; but when he did finally open his eyes, he found the sight of Linda in a powder-blue housecoat a quite sufficient reward for the effort.

"My headache's all gone," she announced cheerfully. "And how is yours?"

He felt of his head and shook it experimentally. "Not a trace of a hangover. That's funny—"

"Funny? You really did celebrate then? What did you do?"

"I went down to the beach and rode on things and then I went to a bar and got talking to a"—he paused and blinked incredulously in a rush of memory—"to an old vaudeville magician. He showed me some funny tricks," he concluded lamely.

"I'm glad you had a good time. And when you next win such a nice fat fee, I promise I won't have a headache. I hope. Now come on; even the man that won the Shalgreen case has to get to the office."

A shower, then coffee and tomato juice made the world perfectly sane and plausible again. Tusked demons and tomato juice could simply not be part of the same world patterns. Neither could daily-sin curses and Linda. All Gilbert Iles' legalistic rationalism reasserted itself.

Taurine wimps—never phrase an unintended wish; it may be granted—silver-scaled tails that garrot at midnight—this was the damnedest drunken fantasy that the mind had ever framed.

Gilbert Iles shrugged blithely and whistled while he shaved. He broke off when he realized that he was whistling that tuneless chant to which the—imaginary of course—demon had intoned the rimed curse.

He went through a perfectly normal and unperturbed day, with enough hard work to banish all thought of demons and wimps. An unexpected complication had arisen in the Chasuble murder case. The sweet old lady—such ideal jury bait—who was to appear as a surprise witness to Rolfe's alibi suddenly announced that she wanted two thousand dollars or she'd tell the truth.

This came as a shock both to Iles and to his partner Tom Andrews. They'd taken the witness in good faith and built the whole defense around her. This sudden unmasking meant first a long conference on whether they could possibly get along without her—they couldn't—then a guarded and difficult conversation with Rolfe in jail, and finally an afternoon of trying to raise the two thousand before her deadline at sunset.

Then Linda met him downtown for dinner and a movie, and they danced a bit afterward to make up for the celebration that the headache had marred. They even played the game of remember-before-we-were-married, and parked on a hilltop near home for a half-hour.

It was almost twelve thirty when they got home. It was one by the time Iles had conclusively said good night to his wife and retired to the study for a final check-over of the depositions of the prosecution witnesses at the preliminary hearing.

There, alone in that quiet pine-paneled room, he thought of the wish and the curse for the first time since his morning shave. It was now over an hour past midnight. All day long he had been too busy to devote an instant to sin. And his neck was still eminently unstrangled. He smiled, trying to figure out what curious combination of subconscious memories could have produced such a drunken nightmare. Creative imagination, that's what he had.

Then, just as a final touch of direct evidence, he said, "Sriberdegibit!"

The demon sat cross-legged on the desk, his height fluctuating and the plaintive twang of his tusk ringing through the room.

Gilbert Iles sat speechless. "Well?" the demon said at last.

"Well—" said Gilbert Iles.

"You summoned me. What goes?"

"I— You— I— You're real?"

"Look," Sriberdegibit expostulated. "Am I real? That's a fine thing to call me up to ask. Am I a philosopher? Are you real? Is the universe real? How should I know these things?"

Iles eyed the silver tail somewhat apprehensively. "But—it's way past midnight now."

"So what? Why should I bother materializing unless you summon me or unless I have to finish you off?"

"And you don't have to?"

"Why should I? You did your daily sin all right."

Iles frowned. "When?"

"You arranged to suborn a witness, didn't you?"

"But that . . . that's all in the day's work."

"Is it? Didn't something hurt a little inside when you decided to do it? Didn't you use to say to yourself when you were young that you weren't going to be that kind of a lawyer, oh no? Didn't you sin against yourself when you did that?"

Gilbert Iles said nothing.

"Can I go now?" Sriberdegibit demanded.

"You can go."

The demon vanished. Iles sat in his study a long time that night, staring at the desk but not seeing the prosecution's depositions.

"Tom, about this phony witness of Rolfe's, I'm not sure we ought to use her."

"Not use her? But the whole case'll blow up without her."

"Not necessarily. I think we're overreaching ourselves anyway with a plea of not guilty. If we lose out, it'll mean the gas chamber for him. But if we

change the plea to guilty in a lesser degree, we can maybe get him off with five or ten years."

"And after we've paid out two thousand?"

"Rolfe paid that. And he can afford to."

"Nuts, Gil. You're not going ethical on me, are you?"

"Hardly. But it's not safe. She can't be trusted. She might go on strike for more yet. She might even sell out to the prosecution and arrange to break down on her cross-examination. She could blackmail us by threatening to confess to the Bar Association."

"Maybe you're right at that. When you put it that way— Here, let's have a snort on it. What else do you know?"

"Nothing much. Oh, I did pick up a choice little item on Judge Shackford. Do you know that in the privacy of his chambers—"

Gilbert Iles felt the cool balm of relief. He wasn't becoming one of these prigs who prate about ethics. God, no. But it was one thing to sin casually against yourself, and quite another to be reminded of it—to know consciously that you had sinned and thereby saved your neck.

Talking Rolfe into the change of plea was another matter. It was only accomplished after Iles had built an exceedingly vivid picture of the dear sweet old lady selling out on the witness stand and delivering Rolfe straight to the Death Row. Then there were officers to see and papers to file and the whole new strategy of defense to go over minutely with Tom Andrews.

He phoned Linda that he wouldn't be home, dined on sandwiches and spiked coffee in the office, and finally got home at eleven, too tired to do more than hang up his clothes, brush his teeth, and bestow one half-conscious kiss on his wife before his eyes closed.

He woke up the next morning feeling badly puzzled, and wondered what he was puzzled about. It wasn't until about ten thirty, in the midst of a conference with a client, that the worry struck him clearly. He hadn't had time to do a thing yesterday except the surely quite unsinful business of abandoning the perjured witness. And yet no silvery tail had coiled about his throat at midnight.

He got rid of the client as soon as he decently could. Then, alone in his office, he cleared his throat and said, "Sriberdegibit!"

The wavering outline of the demon sat tailor-wise on his desk and said, "Hi!"

"You," said Gilbert Iles, "are a fake. You and your curse and your tail. Poo, sir, to you!"

Sriberdegibit twanged at his tusk. His tail twitched hungrily. "You don't believe I'm really going to attend to you? Ha!"

"I certainly don't. The whole thing's a fraud. I didn't have time yesterday to work in a single sin. And here I am, safe and sound."

"You just underrate yourself," said the demon not unkindly. "Remember spreading scandal about Judge Shackford? That's getting around nicely, and it's going to cost him the next election. That'll do for one day."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of it as— Oh— But look, Srib. We've got to get this clear. What constitues—" He broke off and answered the buzzer.

It was Miss Krumpig. "Mr. Andrews wants you to go over the brief on appeal in the Irving case. Shall I bring it in now, or do you have a conference? I thought I heard voices."

"Bring it in. I was just . . . ah . . . just rehearsing a speech." He clicked off.

"Well now," said Sriberdegibit. "As to what constitutes—"

"Begone," Iles interrupted hastily as the door opened.

Miss Krumpig listened and frowned as she entered. "That's a funny noise. Sort of a plaintive twanging like. It's dying away now—"

She put the rough draft of the brief

on his desk. As usual, she leaned over more and nearer than there was any good reason to. She had changed to a subtler scent and had discovered a blouse with the maximum combination of respectability and visibility.

Anyone employing Miss Krumpig should have had no trouble at all in contriving a sin a day.

"Will that be all now, Mr. Iles?"

He thought of Linda and the curse of a monogamous temperament. "No," he said firmly. "I'll think of something else." Miss Krumpig left the room trying to figure that one out.

For a week the curse took care of itself, with very little help from Gilbert Iles. He thought of a few sins for himself; but it is not easy to sin when your love for your wife and your newly stimulated professional conscience block the two simplest avenues. Saturday night he did manage to cheat undetected in the usual poker game and wound up with thirty-one ill-gotten dollars—which once the deadline was passed he proceeded to spend on a magnificent binge for the bunch of them. Another night he visited a curious dive that he had often heard rumors of, something in the nature of the more infamous spots for tourists in Havana. It was the one way of committing a sensual sin without infidelity to Linda. It was also a painful bore.

The other days, the days when he was too busy or too uninventive to achieve what he thought a sin, turned out all right, too. Like the day when the girl in the restaurant gave him change for a ten out of his five. He noticed the mistake and accepted the money as a gift from the gods, thinking nothing more of it. But Sriberdegibit was sinfully delighted when the girl had to make up the difference, couldn't do it, and lost her job. No garroting that night.

Then there was the pedestrian that he playfully scared, causing a heart attack. There was the boon companion whom he encouraged in a night's carousing, knowing subconsciously that it meant starvation rations for his children. There was the perfectly casual lie with which he got out of jury duty—a sin, Sriberdegibit explained, against the State as representing his fellow man.

But these episodes all had their effect, and that effect was, for a cursed man, an awkward one. Gilbert Iles was as careless and selfish as the next man, but he was not constituted to do ill willfully. After the Judge Shackford business, he was rather careful as to the scandalous rumors which he spread. He drove carefully, he revised his statement on jury duty, he developed a certain petty financial scrupulousness.

And one midnight, driving home alone from an evening's business-sociability with a client, he felt cold scales coil about his throat.

Gilbert Iles did not have the stuff of a good sinner. His first reaction was to pull the car up to the curb; an automobile guided by a strangled corpse would be a frightful danger at large. And as he did so he managed with choking breath to gulp, "Sriberdegibit!"

The elastic shape of the demon wavered on the steering wheel as the car stopped. Iles tried to shift away from it in the cabined limits of the coupé, but the silver tail held him fast. "Must talk!" he gasped. "One minute!"

Sriberdegibit hesitated, then let his tail relax ever so slightly. "O. K.," he said. "I was starting in a minute earlier to make it slow and comfortable. I can do it faster right at midnight, but you won't like it."

"Comfortable!" Iles grunted. His hand slipped beneath the scaly coils and massaged his aching neck. "But listen." He was thinking faster than he had ever thought in front of a jury. "Our agreement—invalid under laws of this country—contract involving murder non-enforceable as contrary to general welfare.

Sriberdegibit laughed and the tail

twitched tighter. There was nothing plaintive or grotesque about him now. This was his moment; and he was terrible in his functional efficiency. "I'm not subject to the laws of this country, mortal. Our contract is by the laws of my kingdom!"

Iles sighed relief, as best he could sigh under the circumstances. "Then you can't strangle me for another hour."

"And why?"

"Contract under your kingdom . . . you admit . . . midnight now but only by daylight saving war time . . . laws of this country . . . to your kingdom it is only eleven o'clock."

Slowly the tail relaxed. "I would," said Sriberdegibit mournfully, "draw a lawyer. But you'd better get busy before midnight."

Gilbert Iles frowned. Then he started up the car. "Down here on the boulevard there's a blind cripple sells newspapers. Works all night— I've often noticed him there. If I—"

"Now," said the demon, "you're getting the swing of it."

Gilbert Iles waited until a late streetcar had picked up the little herd of people waiting by the cripple. Then he started across his street, but his feet would not guide him to the blind vender. They took him first into a bar. He had three rapid drinks, his eyes fixed on the clock whose hands moved steadily from twelve toward one.

"Don't let the time get you, Mac," the barkeep said consolingly after the third. "It ain't closing time till two. You got all the time in the world."

"It's closing time at one," said Iles tautly, and felt his gullet tighten up at the memory of those scaly coils.

"You look kind of worried. Need some company?" This was from a girl with a red dress and a bad bleach. "Well, I do," she went on when he didn't answer. "You'll buy me a drink, won't you? Sure you will. The usual, Joe."

The hands went steadily around. The drinks came regularly. The girl moved her stool closer, and the red skirt glowed warm against his thigh. This would be such a simple way. The choice was clear: To sin against a total stranger who would suffer deeply from it, or to sin against your wife who would never know it. The problem was simple, but Gilbert Iles knew the answer before he even considered it. He rose at last from his stool, his eyes fixed on the clock.

"It's almost midnight," he said. "Closing time."

The barkeep and the girl in red stared after his lurching exit, and then stared wonderingly at each other. "You're slipping, Verne," said the barkeep.

"This time," said Verne, "I'll have a *drink*."

Gilbert Iles reached the corner. Another streetcar load was just leaving. Behind them they left the empty corner and the blind cripple. He sat on the sidewalk, his legs crumpled under him at implausible angles. His head with its black glasses moved slightly at each sound. Everything about him was very clear to Gilbert Iles. He could see that his left thumbnail was cracked, that he had a hairy mole high on his right cheekbone, that there was exactly two dollars and thirty-seven cents in the cash box.

Iles shut his own eyes as he grabbed the cash box. He couldn't have said why, unless it was from some unconscious desire to even the odds between himself and his adversary.

Self-blinded, he seized the box. It was a low foul damnable act, and he was doing it to save his neck. Neither his closed eyes nor his many whiskeys could blind him to the baseness of the act. Sin is not fun.

And as he grabbed he felt a choking grip on his neck.

His mind whirled. He couldn't be wrong. He had five minutes to spare. And this was certainly a— And then he realized that the grip was not of scales but of finger and thumb.

He opened his eyes. The vender towered over him. The dark glasses were gone, and the legs uncoiled from their double-jointed posture. The face with the hairy mole was transfigured by righteous wrath and the hand with the broken thumbnail was balled into a fist driving straight at Iles' face. It connected beautifully.

"You low scum of a rat!" the vender murmured. "Rob a blind man, will you?" *Thud.* "Steal a cripple's earnings, will you?" *Whom.* "Take advantage of a man's helplessness, will you?" *Crash.*

The accurate legal mind of Gilbert Iles gave one last flicker. "But you're not a—"

"You thought I was, didn't you?"

Guilt and the whiskeys combined to rob Iles of any power to fight back. When it was over, his puffed lips formulated one question. "Whaddime-izzit?"

The vender deciphered it and looked at a concealed watch. "One ten."

"Thanks, brother," Iles groaned. The sodden pulp of his face managed to smile.

"Sriberdegibit!" he said when he was back in the car.

"I'm still here," said the voice that bounced through invisible caves. "You didn't dismiss me."

"Sorry. Can't see so good. My eyes . . . they swell— But it's after even your midnight, and I didn't manage to—"

The demon repeated the vender's own argument. "After all," he said consolingly, "you meant ill."

"And what," Linda demanded, "were you celebrating last night?"

Gilbert Iles rolled over in bed, sat up, and opened his eyes. Or rather he tried to open them. Through puffy slits he could barely see his wife and beside her the clock which said one thirty.

He gave a groan and started to jump out of bed. When he moved his muscles, the groan redoubled and he sank back on his pillow.

"You *are* in a state," said Linda. There was sympathy under the tartness of her voice.

"The time," Iles muttered. "The office— Tom—"

"Tom phoned about eleven. I told him you were laid up with a bad cold."

"But I ought to—"

"I thought you'd better sleep it off. And you're not going to any office today looking the way you do. I'd bring you a mirror to prove it, only it's no sight to greet a man before breakfast. But what was all the celebrating for? And I didn't have a headache last night."

"You see, dear—" Iles tried to articulate between swollen lips.

Linda smiled. "Don't try, darling. Sorry I asked. Tell me after breakfast —or never, if you don't want to. Everything'll be ready as soon as you are."

Every perfect wife is a perfect diagnostician. For this breakfast Linda had prescribed soft-boiled eggs, tomato juice, a very full pot of black coffee, the morning paper—in its virginal and unrumpled state—and solitude. She served his food but did not speak to him or come near him again.

After the fifth cup of coffee and the third cigarette, Gilbert Iles went in search of his wife. He found her on the sun porch watering the ferns. She wore a bright printed jumper and the sun was alive in her hair.

"Linda—" he said.

"Yes, darling?" She scooped a magazine off the most comfortable chair and helped him as his creaking legs eased into it.

"I've got something to tell you, Linda."

She went on watering the ferns, but her hand trembled enough to scatter a few drops wide of their mark. "What is it? A new case?"

"No, it's— There's something about me you'll have to know, dear."

"How long is it? Three and a half years? And there's something I still don't know?"

"I'm afraid there is."

"Bad?"

"Bad."

"Worse than smoking in the bathroom?"

He laughed, but it hurt his mouth. "A little. You see, Linda, I . . . I'm living under a curse."

Water splashed on the floor. Then Linda forced herself to set the can down very steadily, take a cloth, and mop up the mess. Not till she had finished did she say, very lightly, "That's a fine thing to say. Here I wear my fingers to the bone slaving to make a nice home for you—"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I know. It's just that— Well, it's a funny way of putting it. Tell me what's the matter."

"It isn't anything to do with you—"

Linda went over to the chair and put her arm around his shoulder. "Isn't it just?" she demanded fiercely. "Whenever there's something the matter with you, Gilbert Iles, and it is something to do with me. You're me; don't you understand that?"

"My curse isn't your curse. You see, Linda, it's . . . I know it's hard to believe, but . . . well, I have to commit a sin every day."

Linda stared at him. Her face expressed a sort of grave average between laughter and tears. "You mean— Oh, darling, do you mean I'm not enough for you?"

He took her hand. "Nonsense. You're all I ever want."

"Then is it . . . I know you've been drinking a lot lately, but I thought . . . you don't mean it's . . . got hold of you, do you?"

"It isn't that. It isn't any particular kind of sin. It's just a sin. You see, I told you. It's a curse."

Linda regarded him seriously. "You did drink all that tomato juice and coffee, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you'd better tell me all about this from the beginning." She slid comfortably onto his lap and kept her ear close to his aching lips.

"It started," he began, "that night I was celebrating the Shalgreen case. It happened I met a—"

"But that's awful," she said when he had finished. "That's terrible. To think that all sorts of silly little wishes might be granted, do get granted— Oh my! The things I wished when I was in high school— I'll have to be careful."

"Then you do believe me?"

"Of course."

"I hardly dared expect— That's why I didn't tell you before. It's so fantastic."

"But you told me," she said simply, and leaned over to kiss him. "No, I'd hurt your poor lips."

"But what am I going to do? I can't go on like this. For one thing I never know what's going to count as a sin or not. But what's worse, I . . . I'm afraid I don't like to sin. Not when I know it, not when I think: This is sinning. You have to be a special kind of person for that; and I'm not. What are we going to do?"

"Mm-m-m," said Linda thoughtfully. "I know one thing. I'm going to keep wishing your curse'll be lifted and maybe sometime there'll be one of my wimps around."

"One chance in a thousand, the little man said."

"Wait—I have an idea."

"Yes?"

"Get out the car. We're going down to the beach and find your fringe-bearded magician and fight magic with magic."

The bartender at the beach said, "Naw, he ain't been around here since that night you was with him, and that's O. K. with me. Every time he'd grab him a cigarette out of the air, som

drunk'd get to thinking that was some screwy gadget we had here and get sorer'n hell 'cause he couldn't grab 'em, too. Tell me, mister: How did he work that trick?"

"He was a magician," said Gilbert Iles. "Do you know where he lived?"

"Seems to me it was down the beach a ways at the Mar Vista. Have another round?"

"No, thanks. Drink up, darling."

The clerk at the Mar Vista said, "Little man with a fringe beard? He was registered under the name O. Z. Manders. Left here about ten days ago."

"Leave any forwarding address?"

"No. He left in quite a hurry. Got a cablegram, and *whoosh!* he was gone."

"A cablegram? You don't know what—"

"I just noticed it was from Darjeeling. That's in India, isn't it?"

The clerk at the travel office said, "Little man with a funny beard? Yes, he was here. I explained to him that in times like these you couldn't guarantee any kind of rush accommodations for travel, he'd have to take his chances. So he got mad and went away."

"Thanks." Gilbert Iles started to leave, but Linda held him back.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "but how did he go away?"

The clerk stammered. "I . . . I don't know. How should I?"

"Please. We understand. Did he just vanish—*pouf!*—with smoke and stuff?"

The clerk said, "I am not a drinking man. But you seem sympathetic, madam. I assure you that he took a handkerchief out of his breastpocket and spread it on the floor, where it grew to the proportions of a carpet. Then he said some strange word and I swear that I saw the handkerchief fly out the door with him on it. But if you ever mention that to my employers—"

"So that's that," Linda observed. "You said your little man kept talking about Darjeeling, and now he's had to go back there. We can't get any help from him."

"I hope," said Gilbert Iles, "he isn't too much of a problem to the coastal antiaircraft batteries. What would happen to a spotter who reported a magic carpet? But now what can we do?"

Linda held her head high and resolute. "We're going to call up your demon and talk this over with him. If my husband has to commit a sin a day, I want to know just what kind of sins."

They drove for miles up and down the beach. It is not easy in full daylight to find a suitably quiet spot for calling up demons.

"People," Linda sighed at last. "They swarm—"

"Shall we go home?"

"But it's so nice here at the beach—I'm so glad to have a day off with you even if you have to be cursed and beaten to make it. I know! We can call him up in a hotel."

They drove back to the Mar Vista. There was something appropriate in calling up a demon in the magician's former home. The clerk was puzzled by their return and looked suspiciously at Iles' battered face.

"I'll bet," Linda whispered, "he thinks I got this wedding ring at the five-and-dime. I hope."

When they were alone in the drab and scantily furnished room, Gilbert Iles said: "Sriberdegibit!"

The fluctuant form perched itself on the dresser.

Linda gave a little gasp. Iles took her hand. "Afraid, dear?"

"Heavens, no!" Her voice tried valiantly not to shake. "He . . . he's different sizes all over, isn't he?"

"In my kingdom," said the demon, "everything is in an eternal state of flux. It's only mortals who have fixed flesh; it must be very dull."

"I like it," Linda protested. "How

could you buy stockings if your legs— But then you don't wear any, do you? Or anything—" She snuggled close to her husband. "See? I can talk back to him." But her voice was on the verge of sobs.

"What is it now?" said Sriberdegibit mournfully. "Did you summon me just to show me to this female?"

Iles settled his wife onto the bed and stood facing the demon as he might have confronted a hostile witness. "I want to know," he said, "what is a sin?"

"Why bother?" *Twang.* "You're doing all right."

"But I don't like it and I'm not going to take it much longer. Man's a free agent. That's what makes him Man."

"Ha," said Sriberdegibit.

"I warn you, I'm going to break this curse as soon as I can. And in the meantime, I want to know just what I'm up against. What is a sin?"

"Well, you see," said the demon, "that all depends on what you believe. A sin is an offense against yourself, your God, or your fellow man."

"Then blasphemy is a sin?" Iles grinned and let loose a five-minute tirade. Linda covered her head with a pillow. Even the demon blinked once or twice.

"There." Iles brushed the palms of his hands together. "That should do for today."

Sriberdegibit's tail twitched. "But you don't believe in God, do you?"

"Why, I conceive of—"

"Don't bluff now, dear," said Linda. "We've got to know things. And you know you don't really."

"No. I admit I don't."

"Then how," the demon asked plausibly, "can you possibly blaspheme? No, that kind of sin is out for you. So is sacrilege. You've got to believe, consciously or subconsciously, that what you do is a sin."

"Just a minute," Iles objected. "How about these egocentrics who think whatever they do must be right? Can't they ever sin?"

"They know all right. Down underneath. But this atheism makes you hard to find sins for. Now if you were a Catholic, you'd have it easy every Friday; you'd just eat meat. Or if you were a Jew, you could eat pork every day and let it go at that. But for you atheists—"

"Hold on. Isn't atheism itself a sin?"

"Not if it's honest and if it lets other people alone. If a man comes to the knowledge of God and then denies Him; or if he denies the right of other people to believe in Him— How about that? Want to start some religious persecution? That's a good one."

"I— Damn it, I couldn't do that."

"Well, let's see. You can't sin against your God. You can sin against yourself or against your fellow man. That leaves you lots of scope: abduction, adultery, arson, barratry, bigamy, burglary—"

"That's a start. Adultery and bigamy are out."

"If you really—" Linda tried to say.

"Out, I said. Barratry might do."

"What's that? It sounds dreadful."

"Inciting unnecessary litigation. Very bad legal ethics. But this demon, hang it all, has gone and aroused my professional conscience. I don't know— Burglary—"

"What was the first?" Linda demanded of the demon.

Sriberdegibit was beginning to look bored with the whole thing. "Abduction." *Twang.*

"Abduction! That's it. You could do that, couldn't you?"

"Abduction? But what would I do with what I abducted?"

"That doesn't matter. Just abduct."

"But it's a serious infringement of the rights of the individual. I don't know that I could—"

"Gil darling, don't be a prig! Think what'll become of me if he . . . if that tail— Please, dear. You can do a little thing like that for me, can't you?"

No man can resist a pleading wife.

"Very well," said Gilbert Iles. "I'll abduct for you."

"Is that all?" said Sriberdegibit wearily.

"I think so, unless—" Suddenly Iles whirled, in the manner of one tearing away the last shreds of a witness' mask of hypocrisy. "Breaking an oath would be a sin, wouldn't it? Even for an atheist?"

"Atheists don't make oaths. They affirm."

"Then breaking an affirmation?"

"I guess so."

"Very well." Iles raised his right hand. "I hereby solemnly affirm that I shall commit a sin every day of my life." He dropped his hand to point straight at the demon. "Now every day that passes without a sin I will have broken my solemn affirmation."

"Gilbert!" Linda gasped. "You're wonderful."

Sriberdegibit shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's like what you said about contracts. Unenforceable because contrary to good ends. That's a vow more honored in the breach than the observance. No go. Can I go now? Thanks."

Iles stared at the empty dresser. "Demons," he murmured, "are amazing. I never heard that quotation correctly used by a mortal. Do you suppose that Shakespeare— But I hope not."

"It was a brilliant try," said Linda consolingly.

"And now I start on a career of abduction—"

"Uh-huh. First we'll go ride on the merry-go-round and then you take me to dinner at a nice fish place and then home, then you go out and abduct."

Gilbert Iles kissed his wife good night and watched her go into the house. It had been a perfect day. Aside from interviewing a tusk-twanging demon, it had been an ideal, quiet, happy day at the beach. He sighed; started up the car, and set off on an abduction prowl.

There was no use trying anything until night had really fallen. Meanwhile he drove around at random, surveying people. Casing the job, as a client had once called it. The ideal victim for an abduction should be alone and helpless. If not helpless, certainly not capable of battering Iles' picturesque face any further. He forced himself to look professionally upon possible victims—small children, old ladies.

He shuddered at himself. His mind, which should be devoted to the humane practice of his profession, twisting itself into these devious and stupid byways of sin. He was glad when the night grew dark. Now he could get it over with.

He turned the car onto an ill-lit side road. "The first person I see," he muttered, "after I count a hundred. *One—two—three—*" He narrowed his eyes so that they saw only the road ahead. "*Fifty-five—fifty-six—*" Nothing to it. Simply a snatch. And then? "*Ninety-nine—one hundred.*" He widened his eyes and fixed them on the first person along the all but deserted street.

It was a policeman.

"May I be—" Iles began, but stopped. Once was enough; he had sworn off that oath ever since the night in the bar. But a cop was too much. Not even practical. Make it two hundred. "*One oh one—one oh two—*" His eyes narrowed again. What do you do with a once-abducted victim? Where on earth do you— "*One ninety-nine—two hundred.*"

This time it was an old woman in a shabby gray coat, carrying a string bag that clinked. Gilbert Iles set his teeth and pulled the car up to the curb. He flung the door open and tried to remember every gangster picture he had ever seen.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The old lady got in. "That's awfully nice of you," she said. "Of course I'm only going to my daughter's, the one that's married to the fireman, and it's just a ways up the hill here but I'm not so young as I used to be and these hills

hit me in the back sometimes. It's awfully nice of you to give me a lift. You know, young man, you look like the picture Cousin Nell sent us of that boy her second girl married. You haven't got any folks in Cedar Rapids, have you?"

Gilbert Iles gave up. Just a way up the hill he stopped the car in front of the indicated house, opened his own door, got out, and helped his passenger to alight. She had not stopped talking once. "—and I do thank you, young man, and I wonder"—she reached into the clinking string bag—"if you'd like a glass of this jelly I was bringing my daughter? It's Satsuma plum and her Frank, he certainly does love it, but I guess he won't mind missing one glass. Here. You wouldn't like to come in and see that grandson I was telling you about? Of course he'd be asleep by now, but—"

"No, thanks," said Iles politely. "But give him my love. And thanks for the jelly."

As he drove off he muttered a full stream of what the demon had assured him could not be blasphemy, but which felt quite as satisfactory. Then back to the beginning. *"One—two—three—"* What would he run into this time? A detachment of marines? *"Ninety-nine—one hundred."*

It was a man, alone. Iles pulled the car up just ahead of him, slipped out, and stood beside the walk waiting for him, his hand sinisterly thrust into his topcoat pocket.

"Get in the car!" he snarled.

The man looked at him, then burst out guffawing. "Iles, you old son of a gun! What a card! Wait'll I tell the boys down at City Hall! What are you doing wandering around here? Who waded into your face like that? Where's Linda? What a card! How's about a drink? There's a good joint near here. 'Get in the car!' What a card!"

"Ha ha," said Gilbert Iles.

What was all this? Were there really guardian angels, as well as wimps and demons, and was his deliberately frustrating his every effort at a serious sin? Well, there were still three hours to go. If he pretended to drop his abductive intention— Or can you fool a guardian angel? He didn't know.

He didn't care much either, after the third or fourth round. The politician was right; this was a good joint. The liquor was fair and the entertainers lousy; but there was a magnificent Negro who played such boogie-woogie as Iles had never heard before. Even curses and sins did not matter particularly when that black boy really took it and lifted it out of this world.

In one ecstatic moment, Gilbert Iles' eye happened to light on the clock, and ecstasy vanished. It was almost twelve thirty.

"Sorry," he said hastily. "Got a date at one."

The politician leered. "And I thought you were a good boy. How about Linda?"

"Oh, that's all right. Linda told me to. Good-by." And he disappeared almost as rapidly as his friend the demon was wont to.

He turned up the first side street that presented itself. He didn't bother with the counting game this time. The minutes were short. His neck already twitched in anticipation of that garroting tail. Surely a trained lawyer's mind could find some way of breaking that curse. Surely— For one hesitant instant he wavered on the verge of discovery. His alcohol-sharpened intellect seemed, for one sharp moment, to see the solution of the whole problem. Then his eyes caught sight of a figure on the sidewalk, and the solution went *pop!*

The routine was becoming automatic. You pull up to the curb, you fake the presence of a gun, and you snarl, "Get in the car!"

The girl drew herself up haughtily. "What do you mean, get in the car?"

"I mean get in the car. And quick!"

"Oho you do, do you? And why should I get in the car?"

"Because I said so." His arm snaked out—he could not help comparing it to a silver-scaled tail—seized her wrist, and dragged her in. He slammed the door and without another word drove off.

He could not see the girl at all well, but she used the scent which Miss Krumpig had recently discarded.

"Where are you taking me? What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm going to abduct you."

"I . . . I'll scream. I warn you: I'll scream. I'll—" Abruptly she lowered her voice and slid over in the seat until she was touching him. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

He did not care for the scent, but he was forced to admit that it had a certain effectiveness. "Who said anything about hurting you?" he said gruffly. "All I'm doing is abducting you."

On the other side of town from the beach, Gilbert Iles finally parked the car in a quiet street. The girl turned to him expectantly. The faint light of the dashboard cast heavy shadows around her face, giving it a half-seen lure that was almost beauty.

"Get out," he said firmly.

She gasped. "Get out— Oh, I get it. This is where you live." She got out and left the door open for him. He reached over and shut it.

"Consider yourself," he said, "abducted."

It was five after one as he drove away. The outraged yelp of the abandoned girl followed him. It was five after one, and his neck was still whole. But he did not look forward to a lifetime career of abduction.

"Is your cold better?" Tom Andrews started to ask as his partner came into the office, but broke off and gaped at the colorful ruin of his face. "What in the name of seven devils have you been up to?"

"Just a spot of sin," said Gilbert Iles. "And it was only one devil."

"It'll wear off," said Andrews easily. "You take it easy today. I'll handle the appearance on the Irving appeal. You can't go into court . . . er . . . looking like that. A spot of sin, huh? You'll have to give me the address of that spot—for when I'm on vacation," he added pointedly.

Miss Krumpig gaped, too, when she brought in the morning mail. But she politely covered her amazement with small talk. "Isn't it hot today, Mr. Iles? My! I wish I were at the north pole!"

Iles jumped. "Don't *do* that!"

"Don't do what, Mr. Iles?"

"Don't make foolish wishes. You never know what they'll lead to. Don't ever let me hear you do such a thing again!"

He spent a busy day working on papers and seeing no one, a nice, dull, drab day. He got home in good time, wondering what Linda would have for dinner and what sin he could manage to force himself to commit that night. Not abduction again; definitely not abduction. Barratry seemed promising; now just how could he go about—

Linda wore a warning frown as she greeted him. "People," she said. "Strange people. I don't think they're possible clients but they insist on seeing you. They've been here for hours and now there isn't any more beer left and—"

Iles felt a trembling premonition. "Stick with me," he said.

The premonition was justified. He couldn't have sworn to the face of the abducted girl, but that was certainly her scent. How could she— Then it clicked. Simple for her to have read his name and address on the steering rod. And beside her, surrounded by a barricade of empty beer bottles, sat the biggest man that Gilbert Iles had ever

seen. He looked like a truck driver; but the truck, to be worthy of him, would have to be huger than anything now on the roads.

"There he is!" the girl shrilled.

The giant looked up, and with no wordy prologue drained the bottle in his hand and hurled it at Iles' head. It missed by millimeters and shattered on the wall. It was followed by the giant's fist, which did not miss.

Gilbert Iles found himself sitting on the table in the next room. His ears were ringing with more than Linda's scream.

"Attaboy, Maurice!" the abductee chortled.

Maurice grinned and visibly swelled. "That," he announced, "was just a starter."

Linda stepped firmly in front of him. "This is a fine way to act! You come into my house and drink up all my beer and then you sock my husband! Why, a demon's a gentleman alongside of you. Take that!" And she slapped his vast round face. She had to stand on tiptoe to do it.

"Look, lady," Maurice mumbled almost apologetically. "Thanks for the beer, sure. But that may be your husband, but he insulted my sister. Now let me at him."

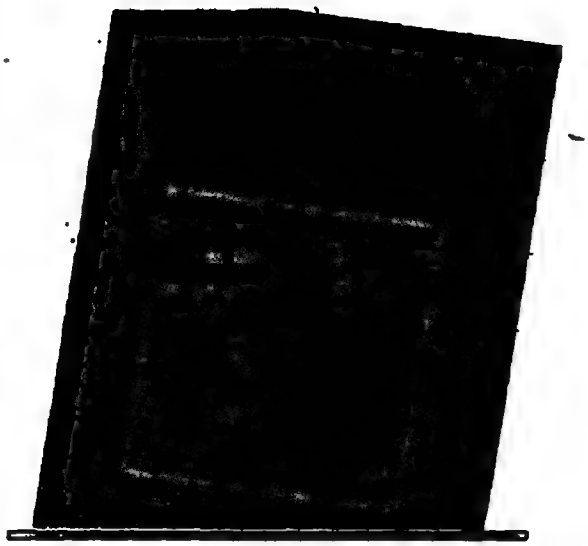
Gilbert Iles tried to get off the table, but his head swam and his knees wonkled. He folded his legs under him and sat like Sriberdegibit, feeling as though he were changing size quite as persistently.

"Any jerk what insults my sister," Maurice announced, "gets what's coming to him. And that's me."

Linda half turned to her husband. "Did you, Gil? Oh— But you said you wouldn't. You promised you wouldn't."

"Did I what?" Iles held on to the table with both hands; it showed signs of turning into the fringe-beard's magic carpet.

"Did you in . . . insult her? And after yesterday afternoon—"



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"I did not," Iles snapped. "I utterly deny the allegation. I did not insult her."

"Oh, no?" The abductee advanced on him. "I've never been so thoroughly insulted in all my life."

"Oh, Gil—"

"Look, lady," Maurice protested, "I got a job to do. You go run along and get dinner or something. You won't like to watch this."

"But I did not! I swear it! I simply abducted her."

The girl's fingernails flashed at him. "Oh, yeah? That's what you said. You tell a girl you're going to abduct her and you carry her off way to hell and gone and leave her stranded and never do a thing to her and if that isn't an insult I'd like to know what is."

"And I ain't standing for it, see," Maurice added.

Linda sighed happily. "Oh, Gil darling! I knew you didn't."

Maurice picked her up with one enormous paw and set her aside, not ungently. "Stick around if you want to, lady. But that ain't gonna stop me. And thanks for the beer."

Gilbert Iles' intention was to slip off the other side of the table. But his wonkling knees betrayed him, and he slipped forward, straight into a left that came from Maurice's shoelaces.

The magic carpet rose, drifting high over the Arabian sands. All the perfumes of Arabia were wafted sweetly about it. The carpet had another passenger, a houri whose face was veiled but who was undisputably Miss Krumpig. Though markedly affectionate, she kept calling him Maurice and telling him to go to it. Then out of a sandstorm emerged a jinni driving a truck. The truck drove straight at him and connected. The magic carpet turned into a handkerchief in the center of which there was a lake. Upon investigation he saw that this lake was blood and all from his own nose. He was an old man, an old man with a fringe beard, and who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? The jinni appeared again bearing an enormous mammoth tusk which twanged. The jinni raised the tusk and brought it down on his head. A woman's voice kept calling, "Darjeeling," or was it, "darling"?

There was a moment's pause, and Gilbert Iles heard the cry clearly. It was, "Darling, say it. Say it!"

He managed to ask, "Say what?" after spitting out a tooth or two.

"Say it! I can't, because it wouldn't work for me and I don't know what might happen but you say it and they'll go away because I've broken three vases on him and he just doesn't notice. So, oh, darling, *say it!*"

He was back on the carpet and so was the jinni. This time the jinni was wearing the tusk in his jaw and he looked amazingly like—

"Sriberdegibit!" Gilbert Iles groaned.

Then the jinni and the magic carpet and everything faded away to peaceful black.

Gilbert Iles opened his eyes in a darkened bedroom. There was an ice bag on his head and a smell of iodine and liniment clinging about him. He tried to move and decided it might be better to wait a day or so. He opened his mouth and heard something that sounded like a Vodet in need of repair.

Through the hall door came in light and Linda. He managed to turn his head—and saw squatting on the bedside table the form of Sriberdegibit.

"Are you all right, dear?" Linda asked.

He said, "What do you think?" or a noise that meant as much, and then stared a silent question at the demon.

"I know," said Linda. "He won't go away unless you dismiss him. But it did work. When you said his name, there he was, and my! you should have seen Maurice and that woman clear out of there!"

"Sissies," said Sriberdegibit.

Undulant demons are more than a sick head can stand. "Begone!" said Gilbert Iles.

The demon shook his head. "Uh-uh. What's the use? I'd have to be back to strangle you in five minutes anyway."

Iles jumped, and every muscle ached with the motion. He managed to look at the bedside electric clock. It was twelve fifty-five.

"I didn't want to wake you," said Linda. "I never thought of that— You . . . you've been good today?"

He looked the question at the demon, who nodded dourly. "Like one of those cocky angels," he asserted.

"Then, you, What's-your-name, you're going to have to . . . to do things to him at one o'clock?"

"On the dot."

"But, Gil darling, can't you quick— I mean isn't there something you can do? I know you practically can't stir from where you are, but isn't there some way you can sin just in your mind? I'm sure there is. Work out a plan for barratry; doesn't planning a sin count? Can't you— Oh, Gil, you can't let yourself get garroted with a snake tail!"

Enforced physical inaction had stimulated Iles' mind. While Linda pleaded, he was performing intricate calculations worthy of a specialist in canon law. Now he summoned up every whit of his power of trained articulation to make his words clear. They sounded inhuman, but they were intelligible.

"Sriberdegibit, is suicide a sin?"

"Oh, Gil dear, you wouldn't— Where would be the advantage—"

"Hush, Linda. Is it?"

"Yes. It's a sin against God or Man. It's a sin against the Giver of Life and against Life itself. It's what you'd call a real good solid sin."

"Very well."

"But, Gil—"

"Hush. Very well. You may go, Srib."

. "Huh? Like fun you say. It's twelve fifty-nine and a half, and here's where I come in." The tail twitched, then slowly began to reach out. Linda fought to repress a scream.

"Wait." Iles had never spoken so fast under such difficulty. "Suicide is a sin, right?"

"Right."

"If I refuse to commit a sin, I die, right?"

"Right."

"If I die through my own deliberate act, that's suicide, right?"

"Right."

"Then if I refuse to perform my daily sin, I am committing suicide, which is a sin. There, begone!"

The tail hesitated a fraction of an inch from Iles' throat. A very slow take spread over the demon's shifting face. He twanged his tusk twice. Then, "why I . . . I'll be God *blessed!*" he said, and vanished.

"You know, darling," Linda said later, "it hasn't been so bad after all. You can take your vacation now and get all healed up again and then you'll never know you were ever cursed. In fact you'll be better than ever, because now you'll drive carefully and you won't spread scandal and you won't do anything shady in your profession and—" She paused and stared at him rapturously. "My! I have a brilliant husband!"

He nodded inarticulate thanks.

"That was the most beautiful thinking. Why now there won't be any stopping you. You'll go on and you'll be attorney general and governor and a justice of the supreme court and— No. No. I don't really want that. I wish—"

"Oh, oh!" Gilbert Iles groaned warningly.

"I wish," she continued unchecked, "that we could just go on living quietly, but very, very, *very* happily."

There was a wimp present.

THE END.

The Rabbit And The Rat

by Robert Arthur

There are worse things than solitary confinement—but not if you're confined for life in the neatly horrible way Chuck Banning was when the rabbity little man got through with him—

Illustrated by Orban

Dr. Nicholas Dete, late professor of psychology of Westate University, recently retired to do research work in his own home following the tragic kidnaping and murder of his only child and the subsequent suicide of his wife, looked up as José, his clever Filipino assistant, entered the little office. In his pale-blue watery eyes there was a question which the other answered by nodding.

"I left him inside the door. They did not hear me," José reported. "They will be glad to see him, I am sure. I arrived just after the postman delivered the package."

"Good." A queer glow came into the little psychologist's eyes. "And the others? Have you learned what became of them?"

"Yesterday, while Mr. Banning was eating breakfast," José reported, "a pigeon flew in his window and began to flutter agitatedly about the room. Finally it settled on the table and cooed at him. Mr. Banning cursed and threw a book at it, breaking its wing. He tossed it out the window. It fell into the street, and an alley cat promptly killed it.

"A little later, when Mr. Banning left his apartment, a small, dirty dog with curly red hair that had been lying outside the door leaped up at him, barking frantically as if to attract his attention. Banning cursed again, and kicked it, breaking some of its ribs. Then when he had been driven off by his chauffeur, the man Monk Norman, obviously agitated, some boys caught the dog and chased it away with tin cans tied to its tail."

"Ah!" For a moment Dr. Nicholas Dete sat silent. His glance turned toward a pane of glass, transparent from this side but silvered so that in the next room it seemed a mirror, which let him look into his laboratory. In the room were two rubber-tired operating tables, a cage holding a monkey that now was hunting fleas boredly, and a curious cylinder of white cheesecloth dropping from the center of the ceiling. Then the little man rose.

"Today, I think," he said quietly, an

obscure look in his eyes. "Shall we make ready?"

Dete. Dr. Nicholas Dete. It was a silly name. As silly as the man himself looked—a small, rabbity creature with protruding front teeth, wide-set pale eyes, and straw-colored hair that never seemed to be brushed in any particular direction, but which lay haphazardly over the rounded dome of his skull like dead grass blown by the wind.

Dr. Nicholas Dete! It was a name that Chuck Banning used to get a lot of laughs out of. Nicholas Dete, who looked like a rabbit, and had more lettuce stashed away than the mint!

Only, somehow, Banning wasn't amused any more.

Chuck Banning stood before his dresser, critically appraising himself. He straightened his tie and brushed a bit of lint from his lapel. Then immaculate in a slate-blue sharkskin, white shirt, pale-blue cravat with tiny fingers, and gleaming cordovan shoes, he was ready for the day.

He turned away, adjusted a handkerchief in his breast pocket, and stalked into the living room of his perfectly appointed apartment.

"Manuel," he said, and his Filipino boy popped into the room from nowhere. "Serve my coffee in here."

Manuel vanished again. The tall man dropped into an easy-chair, crossed his legs, and with irritability plain on his squarish face, marked by subtle lines of cruelty, lit a Turkish cigarette.

Dr. Nicholas Dete! It had been funny enough to see the little man squawking around after they had snatched the kid. As if anyone could have loved a kid like that! A slobbering, hare-faced nuisance that yelled continually and would have grown up to look exactly like its father. Why, it was practically a public service to put the brat out of its misery.

Not that it had been as dumb as it looked, though. In spite of being only five, it had recognized him the one time he slipped into the hide-out and it had somehow wriggled its blindfold off. Recognized him from just seeing him that once, the day its old man had had it out walking, and Chuck Banning had stopped to talk to Dete. Sometimes kids were bright that way. Anyway, it had recognized him.

So after they'd collected from Dete, Chuck Banning had had to slap it silly with the butt end of a gun. Funny that anybody's skull, even a kid's, could be so thin a gun butt would go right in and the brains splash out like so much butter—

Never mind that. It was the kid's own fault, wasn't it? Nobody had meant to hurt it. But that was how it turned out. Not that he gave a damn. And if the little roach's mother wanted to go jump in the river afterward, that was her own business. One thing, Dete hadn't shown his rabbit face around town much after that. He's resigned his professorship in the university and just withdrawn into himself, hardly ever leaving that big old hewn stone house out on the River Road.

A year and a half back, that was, and he'd hardly been seen in town three times since. There wasn't any more heat on the case. All the clues had pointed toward a Chicago mob—who'd ever dreamed it was done by a local mob that had never even left the city limits, except to collect the ransom—and no finger of suspicion had ever pointed at Chuck Banning, the master mind. Nor at Pidge Block, Red Henson, Froggy Lawrence, or Monk Norman, either.

So why did he still keep thinking about Nicholas Dete so much?

Chuck Banning knew damned well why. Because he wanted to know where Pidge Block and Red Henson had disappeared to!

Chuck Banning lit another cigarette, automatically brushing a fleck of ash from his knee. The doorbell rang as he snapped out the match. Manuel appeared, like a suddenly materialized wraith.

"Misto Norman heah," he said.

Banning nodded. "Bring him in. And

bring an extra cup with that coffee."

Manuel slipped out. A moment later Monk Norman was treading across the Sarouk rug with heavy, flat-footed stride.

Monk was an ex-pug who'd had sense enough to quit before his brains got addled too much. He had a flat-nosed face, like a simian's, but he was nobody's dummy.

Now his apish features were clouded over with something more than worry.

"Well?" Chuck Banning asked, lips tight, as Monk dropped into the chair opposite. "What is it? Spit it out!"

Monk's lips worked, but for a moment no words came. Manuel, entering with a tray, interrupted him, and while Manuel was spreading cups and saucers, cream, sugar, coffeepot and silverware on a coffee table, Monk got his tongue working.

"Chuck," he said. "Chuck—"

"Well? Take the knots out of your tonsils and talk!"

"Chuck—Froggy's gone, too!"

Banning put his cup down with a clatter.

"What do you mean, Froggy's gone?" he demanded.

"Just g-gone," Monk gulped. "He ain't in his room. Nobody's seen him since last night, when he went out to get a couple of beers. He never got to Dave's bar, and he never went back to his room. His bed ain't been slept-in. His clothes is all there. His dough, most of it, was in th' coat he left hangin' up. I called up you-know-who at headquarters, and the cops ain't picked him up. He's just *gone*."

Chuck Banning said something under his breath.

"A snatch!" he rasped.

"But who'd snatch Froggy?" Monk asked. "Froggy ain't got no dough. He's just a dumb punk. It don't signify."

Banning gulped his coffee, then swore because he'd burned himself.

"All right, wise guy," he rasped, "you guess."

Monk licked thick lips.

"He's gone the same place Pidge and Red Henson went," he muttered. "Nobody seen them go, either. They just —went."

"They blew town, I tell you!" Banning snarled.

"But they left all their stuff behind 'em, just like Froggy," Monk persisted. "And, Chuck, I been nosing around that little house they had out on th' edge of town. In fact, I rented it for a couple months, through a friend. Day before yesterday I was out there, pokin' around. And I found somethin' buried behind th' furnace—"

"What?" The word came out like a bullet.

"Twenty-five grand in cash," Monk told him. "Their cut from th' snatch of Dete's—"

"Shut up!" Chuck Banning ordered. "I've told you never to think that name, much less say it out loud. If you found the dough two days ago, why're you just tellin' me?"

Monk Norman chewed his lips some more.

"Well," he began tentatively, "Froggy hadn't disappeared then, an' I thought maybe Pidge an' Red might come back, so I left th' lettuce where I found it an'—"

"And if they didn't come back, you were going to slip it into your own pocket and not say anything," Banning told him, eyes vicious.

For a long moment his slate-colored eyes were hooded, like a hawk's. The ex-pug would never have admitted finding the money if he weren't scared—scared silly. Scared, maybe, enough to blab if anybody put pressure on him. And he was right about Pidge and Red. They hadn't blown town. Not and left twenty-five G's behind them.

Chuck Banning rose and began to pace the room. A misplaced candlestick above the fireplace caught his eye, and he moved it. That was one thing he could not stand—dirt, or untidiness. Things about him had to be absolutely neat and clean, his own person at all times immaculate. The horror of dirt, of filth,

was an obsession with him.

About other matters he was less sensitive. Kidnaping, for instance. Or murder—

If Dr. Nicholas Dete, whose ransom money had paid for most of this luxury, looked like a rabbit, Chuck Banning as he paced back and forth, tall, suave, gray-clad, slate-gray-eyed, looked more than anything else like the human counterpart of a great, vicious gray rat. Although it would have been dangerous to tell him so, for rats, because they lived in dirt and filth, sewers, garbage dumps, and other places of uncleanliness, caused a physical revulsion in him far beyond any momentary distress produced by crushing the head of a helpless child—

Now Chuck Banning took his time about replying to Monk. The truth was, he was uneasy too. Red Henson and Pidge Block had been nobody's suckers. They'd been tough. It was inconceivable anyone had taken them without leaving some evidence of a struggle. But they were gone. Who—

The doorbell rang briefly before his churning thoughts had clarified. Then Manuel shuffled in, bearing an oblong Manila-wrapped package.

"Mailman leave," Manuel announced. "Speshuh d'ivery."

Banning took the package. His name and address had been typed on a conventional white label. It was hard, as if the paper covered wood. Like a cigar box. And cigar boxes—

Chuck Manning scowled and handed the package back to Manuel.

"Take it out in the kitchen and open it," he ordered. Manuel padded off. If it was a bomb now, whoever had sent it would be disappointed. If it wasn't—"

Monk's gaze was inquiring. Banning shrugged.

"I don't know what it was," he muttered, features grim. "I'm not expecting any package. If—"

He broke off. From the next room had come a small thudding sound, as if a soft object had fallen on the floor. Three seconds later it was repeated. *Thump*. Once more it came. *Thump*. This time it was closer.

Chuck Banning's hand slipped to his armpit. Monk Norman slid his gun half out. They both faced the open door into the hall.

"Manuel must have left the door open after the mailman," Banning whispered. "Somebody came in. Sit quiet."

They waited, little drops beading their brows. The thumping sound was repeated twice. Then through the open door a small green object leaped, coming down with a *squashy* plop on the hardwood floor.

For a moment it rested there, panting, little eyes staring at them. Then it made three more leaps in quick succession and came to rest at Chuck Banning's feet, staring up at him with goggle eyes.

"It's a toad," Monk muttered.

"A frog," Banning corrected him. "A lousy little frog. What is it doing in here? Yesterday a pigeon flies in. I go outside and a red dog jumps all over me. Today a frog hops in. What goes on?"

His voice was hoarse, because he was nervous and upset. The small creature's cream-colored belly was rising and falling with the effort of its breathing. Its beady gaze was fixed on Banning's face, and its mouth opened. A curious sound came forth, a croak that had an uncanny whimpering note in it. Twice the frog repeated the sound, and there was something almost like desperation in its stare.

"It's like it was trying to talk to you, Chuck," Monk Norman whispered.

Banning had already had that thought himself. He cursed and kicked the thing. The frog flew through the air and fell heavily a dozen feet away. The impact of his toe had made a crunching sound. Now it lay on its side, breathing with difficulty, blood dribbling from its mouth, its eyes fixed on Banning with a look of dumb appeal.

With senseless rage Banning snatched up the fire tongs and picked the little green creature up with it. Holding it

thus, he strode to the window and flipped the frog outward. It landed in the street. An instant later a truck rumbled by, a wheel passed over the feebly struggling amphibian, and when the truck had gone on, nothing was left except a large ugly stain on the concrete.

Banning was wiping his brow with his handkerchief when Manuel entered. Momentarily they had forgotten the package that had arrived. Now, no explosion having occurred, Manuel brought in a cigar box—the large size, built for a hundred cigars—and the paper wrappings neatly folded.

"Rats," he said blandly.

"What do you mean, rats?" Banning demanded.

"Rats," Manuel repeated, and held out the box. "You order um rats, Misto Banny?"

He lifted the lid. Banning and Monk, who had risen, peered in. At sight of the contents, Banning went pale and his stomach turned. In the cigar box were jammed three rats, very dirty and very dead. Their glazed eyes looked up at him. Their tiny, sharp-toothed mouths were open as if in a kind of rattish laughter. And they gave off an odor—a stench of sewers and varied corruption.

Banning gagged and was almost ill as he thrust Manuel away.

"Take them out!" he choked, and had difficulty in controlling his voice. "Out of the house! A long ways away. Get rid of them!"

"Yes, Misto Banny," Manuel agreed, and closed the cigar box. "You no order, yes?"

"You know I didn't!" Banning rasped. "Give me that wrapping paper and get out!"

He took the Manila paper, and Manuel scuttled away, the box of dead rats under his arm. Banning's face, as he met Monk's round-eyed stare, was pale and wet.

"Well?" Banning demanded with viciousness as Monk's lips twisted.

"Three dead rats." The words were just a husky whisper. "An' a frog. A frog that comes hoppin' in as if it was tryin' to get to you an' tell you somethin'. Three dead rats and a frog that made me think somehow about Froggy Lawrence—"

Banning cursed him. He cursed in a quiet, toneless voice for three minutes. Then he stopped. He was swearing because his nerves were all on edge, too. And when a man got nervous, the skids were under him. Abruptly he got hold of himself, took a bottle from a drawer, and poured two drinks.

"Here," he said, "drink this. And forget about th' frog. It don't mean anything. Th' three rats—yeah, maybe they do. Somebody who knows how much I hate 'em sent 'em to get me rattled. Just a gag to put me off my feed. We'll find out who it was and settle with him."

The drink calmed them both. Banning spread out the paper the box of rats had been wrapped in.

"Substation 1," he read the postmark. "That's out th' other side of town. Th' ritzy River Road section."

"Yeah," Monk agreed. "Where them rich guys from th' college live. Why, what's wrong, Chuck?"

Chuck Banning's breath was coming with a whistle, and his face was blackly congested. So that was it! It wasn't possible—but it was the only answer! It had to be. There wasn't anyone else who had a motive. He knew. He knew, and he—"

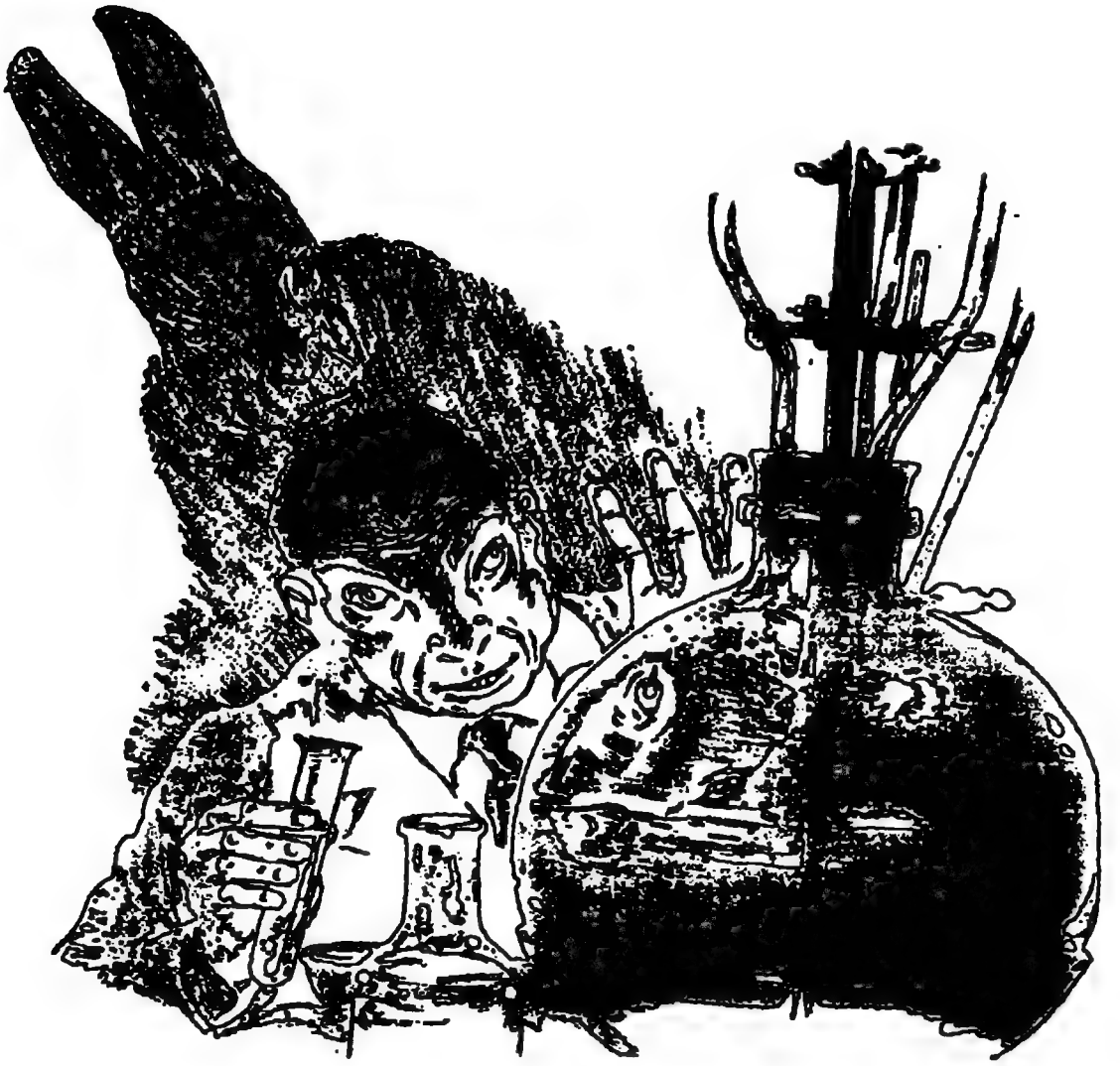
"All right!" Chuck Banning grated, his eyes burning bright. "If that's the way he's playing, we'll play with him. We'll call on him tonight and shew him what it means to be really tough. We'll work over him until his own mother couldn't tell him from a side of beef."

"Who, Chuck? Who're we gonna call on?"

Banning's teeth closed like the jaws of a spring trap.

"Dr. Nicholas Detet"

"O. K., Chuck Banning said curtly. "It's time to get going."



He rose in the darkness from his crouched position behind a heavy clump of shrubbery, overlooking the home of Dr. Nicholas Dete, below. Automatically, after he had put the light binoculars, into his pocket, he brushed himself.

Monk Norman rose too, a shadow in the darkness that had settled as they waited there in hiding.

"I need a smoke," he grumbled. "Three hours we been sitting here. For what?"

"For plenty!" Chuck Banning snapped. "For one thing, to make sure Dete is alone in that house with nobody but his Filipino assistant. Now come on. It's time to move."

He began to pick his way carefully down the night-shrouded slope of the hill, toward the house in which three lighted windows showed as oblongs of yellow.

With some reluctance, Monk Norman followed him.

"Chuck," he whispered. "Chuck, I dunno if we oughta try this. I been thinking. Chuck, I been thinking about those animals. First Pidge Block an' Red Henson disappeared. Then yesterday a pigeon comes flyin' in th' window

like it wants to talk to you. Next a dog with curly red hair, just like Red's, leaps up at you like *he's* tryin' to tell you something. Then Froggy Lawrence goes, an' today a frog comes hoppin' in, like *it* has a message for you." Chuck, it makes me feel sort of funny inside to think—"

"Then stop thinking!" Chuck Banning swore back at him. "I'll do all the thinking around here. You just do what I tell you, see. And the first thing you're going to do is cut th' phone wires. You've been an installation man. You shouldn't have any trouble. Here's the pliers you'll need."

Monk took the tool, and followed in silence. They picked their way to the bottom of the slope, crept across an open stretch of lawn, and reached the cover of a double garage a few yards behind the house. Here they paused. The incoming light and telephone wires were strung from a pole behind the garage. A man on the roof could reach them.

Monk made the garage roof with the aid of a sapling growing alongside, and cautiously crawled up to the peak. There, standing erect and reaching above his head, he was able to touch the wires. It took only a moment to select the phone wire and cut it. The loose end, falling, made a scraping noise in the gravel that sounded loud in the night, but no one responded. After a moment's tense waiting, Monk slid down the roof, dropped to the ground, and rejoined Chuck Banning.

"I saw somethin' in th' gravel down here, Chuck," he reported. "It was catchin' light from one of th' windows. Right over here—"

He stooped, brought up something from the driveway.

"Look, Chuck!" he whispered, his breath an indrawn whistle.

Banning took the object. It was a small silver medal, gleaming faintly.

"Froggy's broad-jump metal, from a public-school meet when he was a kid," Monk choked. "That's how he got his nickname. He carried it for a good-luck piece."

Banning's lips were a thin line.

"O. K., Monk," he said. "It proves Froggy's been here. Maybe he's still here. We're going in now. They'll be sweatin' for a chance to tell us about it in half an hour."

Silently they rounded the house, avoiding the driveway's noisy gravel. Then three stone steps led up to a door of solid oak, sunk beneath a massive arch. Chuck Banning faced it with his right hand in his pocket, fingers curled about the butt of his gun. He waved Monk to one side, into the shadows, and with his left hand pressed the bell beside the door.

The house was too large and solid for the sound of the ring to reach them. They waited in silence. A minute passed, and another. Monk's breathing became heavy in the silence.

He whispered nervously, unable to remain silent, "Maybe they—"

"Shut up!" Banning hissed. Then the door opened. And an instant later Banning, one foot on the threshold, was shoving the muzzle of his gun into the stomach of José, Dr. Nicholas Dete's assistant.

"Quiet!" he said between his teeth, "or I'll blow your backbone right through to the parlor!"

A moment after that, he and Monk were both inside, with Monk fastening the door behind them and Banning staring slit-eyed down into the startled features of José, whose hands were raised.

"Where's Dete?" Chuck Banning demanded of the Filipino, in a low-voiced tone raspy with threat. "We've got a little business with him."

José backed nervously away from the gun that gouged his ribs, his lips opening and closing for a moment before words would come.

"Uh . . . upstairs," he said. "In the laboratory."

"O. K." Chuck gestured to Monk Norman. "Monk! Pin this guy in the belly with your gun sight, and hold him there until I get back. I'm going to take

a quick look through this floor. Then we'll go upstairs. If he makes any noise, liquidate him."

Monk Norman took over his prisoner. Chuck Banning, his gun ready, slid across the dimly lit entrance hall and through the open door beyond. It opened into an empty library, which he scouted swiftly and passed through to a living room, also empty.

He moved with silent speed, and found nothing. It was a fair-sized house and there were five rooms downstairs. They were all empty, and all dark.

But in the kitchen he came to an abrupt halt. Across the kitchen was a door, just an inch or so ajar, and light was streaming through the opening.

Banning paused and listened, heard nothing. The door probably led down into the cellar. There wasn't space for another room beyond. On his toes he crossed the room, reached the wall, slipped up to the doorway without making a noise, and peered through the inch-wide crack without touching the door.

Then a curse caught and strangled in his throat. He was jumpy, and in spite of himself, he started, so that the gun rattled against the door jamb. The noise echoed loudly in the silence, but brought no response. Not even from the three men in the cellar below.

"Pidge!" Chuck Banning grunted. "Red! Froggy!"

His three missing henchmen were all in the cellar at the foot of the stairs beyond the door—a stairs that had at the head of it an ordinary barred door, like the door of a prison cell, hidden behind the innocent wooden door. They lay side by side upon the stone floor, unbound but unmoving. An overhead light shone directly upon their faces, bringing out the ghastly green-white pallor of their skins. Their eyes were closed and their mouths half open, their hands lax beside them. Chuck Banning had seen the posture of death before, and this was it.

For a moment panic threatened to overwhelm him, and he had to fight for self-control. The barred door was locked. He could not get down, and if they were dead, he couldn't do them any good. He backed away, forgetting to be quiet in his haste, then turned and almost ran through the living room and library back to the hallway where he had left Monk and the Filipino assistant of Nicholas Dete.

"Monk!" he whispered urgently. "Monk—"

His voice trailed off. Coming through the doorway, he came to an abrupt stop and stared foolishly at the empty hall.

Monk and José were gone.

Chuck Banning's eyes were wide now, wide with panic. It was only with a desperate effort that he kept himself from bolting, yelling, for the front door and out into the night. That wouldn't do any good. Dete knew. He'd gotten Red, Pidge, Froggy, and now Monk. He'd get him, Chuck, next. Unless Chuck did something. Unless Chuck— Unless Chuck— Unless Chuck—

Vaguely Chuck Banning realized that his uncompleted thoughts were running around in his head like a broken phonograph record. Even as the realization came to him, they blacked out completely. His knees sagged and he hit the floor, a limp bundle. He didn't even know he had fallen.

—

The first thing Chuck Banning was aware of after that was the high shrill whine that cut through his mind like a saw eating into something soft.

Everything else was blackness—everything but that shrill mechanical tone that filled the universe. It kept on and on and on, and as it continued, something inside seemed to be wound up by it, like the mainspring of a watch.

Desperately Banning tried to move, to break free from the darkness that held him. And managed to open his eyes. That was all. The rest of him remained immobile. But he could see now.

He was in a room. The room was in semidarkness save for a cone of light in the center. Hanging beneath the light was a curious white cylinder of cloth.

And just beneath this cylinder was a white table on which a man lay, dead or unconscious, while two other men bent over him.

Monk. It was Monk Norman on the table. Chuck Banning could not quite make out where he himself was, or why he could not move. But he could see Monk clearly. Above Monk, close to the ceiling, a small mirror was flashing. It was spinning rapidly, flashing in Monk's eyes every time it went around.

For some reason only a part of Chuck Banning's mind seemed to be working. The rest was all wound up tight by that continual screaming whine. But with the part that was working, he saw Dr. Nicholas Dete, rabbitlike, as he moved nervously about, lean over Monk. Then Dete raised his hand.

Instantly the mirror stopped whirling, and the shrill scream ceased. Dete swung the cloth cylinder hanging from the ceiling down and arranged it to hide all of Monk's body. He waited a moment, completely still. Then a queer thing happened.

The cylinder of white began to move, as if something was inclosed within it. The instant it first quivered, Dete gathered up the ends and tied them tightly together. Then he pushed Monk away, the table sliding out of Chuck's sight as if it was on wheels.

Fascinated, Chuck Banning watched that tied-up white cylinder. It was pulsing and struggling now as if a captive bird in it were trying to beat its way out. It throbbed, and bulged. Yet it was only cheesecloth, and Banning could see right through it. And he saw there was nothing inside. Nothing whatever. Yet still the cloth fluttered.

Then Dete came back. He was pushing the table again. Only now Monk was gone. Instead, there was a monkey in his place. A little hairy monkey, lying quite still in the middle of the table. Monk had become a monkey, like Froggy had become a frog, Pidge a pigeon, and—

No, that was silly! He knew better. Still, there was a monkey there. Maybe he'd better watch.

Dete pushed the table beneath the cylinder of cloth. The high whine started up again. It continued for a moment, and the white pillar ceased to move. Dete untied the cord about its bottom and draped it over the still form of the monkey. For a minute longer perhaps the unnerving sound continued. The hollow cylinder of cloth made one last convulsive movement, as if the thing inside, the thing Chuck Banning couldn't see, had made a final attempt to escape. Then it hung motionless.

Dete signaled. The sound ceased. He raised the cloth toward the ceiling again, and the monkey on the table stirred and sat up. For a moment it stared about it, dazedly. Then its tiny eyes fell on Chuck Banning—anyway, he guessed they did, because they were looking toward him.

The monkey let out a shrill yelp, and before Dete could catch it, had bounded off its table, raced across the room, and bounded up beside Banning.

Now Banning began to realize he was lying on a table just like the one he could see. Was lying on it, and couldn't move. Because he tried to move, to shove away the ugly hairy little animal that hopped up on his chest and leaned over, peering down into his eyes and chattering, as if trying to talk to him.

Trying to talk to him! But the frog had tried to talk to him. And the pigeon! And the red dog! Had tried to tell him —tell him they were . . . were—

"No!" Chuck Banning screamed. "No! No! It isn't so! Get away, Monk! Go away! It's not you! It's not! It's not!"

But the sound of the words was only in his mind.

Then Dr. Nicholas Dete was lifting the chattering monkey from Chuck's chest and was restraining its efforts to escape again.

"Awake, eh?" he murmured, looking down at Chuck Banning's open eyes.

"Excuse me a moment while we take care of monk. Come on, boy, you'll be safe where we're going to put you. Tomorrow you can go to the zoo. Lots of other monkeys there to play with. You've been through quite an experience this evening. Naturally you're upset."

José came up and took the monkey from Dete. Then the little man stared down at Banning, his pale-blue eyes blank, his buckteeth showing rabbitlike.

"A lot of questions you'd like to ask, I suppose," he suggested, conversationally. "There isn't very much I can tell you though. We haven't fully worked out the theory of what we're doing, ourselves. But it all hinges on the soul.

"Oh, yes," he insisted, as though Banning had contradicted him, "there is such a thing as a soul. Too much evidence to doubt it, even before we succeeded. In certain Scandinavian countries, you know, the house has a small window built in the parlor, close to the ceiling. That's for the soul of the dead to leave through.

"That isn't very scientific, though. However, we have evidence that is. Time-exposure photographs have been taken of dying persons. And have been found by queer light streaks later, when developed. What could that be except the record of some kind of force escaping the mortal body?

"All we've done is discover how to capture that soul. Cage it, so to speak. Were you watching long? Then you saw us do it. That flashing mirror and the whinning sound—those were hypnotic aids, designed to throw the subject into a hypnotic stupor. So deep in fact that the bonds between life and death are loosened, and the soul is freed from its mortal envelope. You disbelieve me? That's quite all right—even scientists will, for a long time to come. We don't mind. We have the proof right here in the laboratory.

"Of course," he went on, "the soul as we . . . well, force it from a living body isn't quite the same soul that emerges after true death. That's why we're able

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to capture it. It's still tied to earth. So we can nab it—and then rehouse it, as it were, in another body. Transference of that intangible essence known as personality. An amazing idea, isn't it?

"Of course, the transference of personality isn't complete. That monkey, for instance—it didn't have a man's mind. Its soul, its individuality, were partly man, partly monkey. Probably the monkey element is predominant. In time the man side may even die out and be almost forgotten. Though I don't think so. But you'll have a chance to test that out for yourself.

"Would you like to see the new body we've chosen for you? Here it is."

Dr. Nicholas Dete turned, and lifted a wire cage from some place outside Banning's vision. It held a large, dirty gray rat, with vicious red eyes and bared teeth, white and sharp. Without smiling the little man stared at it a moment, then put it back.

"I wonder, Banning," he murmured thoughtfully, "what the result will be. Of course, you yourself hate rats. It's an obsession of yours. Naturally, when you find yourself—or your ego, which is the same thing—imprisoned in the body of one, there will be a strong psychic conflict. You will still remember your own fastidiousness, your own horror of physical uncleanliness, while you are actually

living in a sewer and feasting on garbage. You'll know what you're doing, at least for quite a while. The man side of you will have perception, and the rat side will have control. I imagine you'll suffer quite dreadfully. But you must console yourself. It's for the sake of scientific progress. Really it is."

He looked down into Banning's eyes, and may have seen there the horror that was screaming and yelling in a small part of Banning's sleepy mind. But his expression did not change.

"José," he said, "if the apparatus is ready, I think we can go ahead. Mr. Banning is impatient for release."

The small Filipino joined him, and together they wheeled the operating table on which Banning lay beneath the cone of white cloth.

Swiftly Nicholas Dete removed the pillow on which his head was lying. Banning now had to look straight up, at the little mirror overhead, which began to whirl, flashing into his eyes half a dozen times a second. Banning tried to shut his eyes, and could not.

Then the whinning started. High, keen, piercing. It pulled at him, drawing him taut, as if trying to turn him inside out. The light flashing in his mind, and the whine pulling him inside out, began to lift him. He could feel himself rising. He felt lighter and lighter, like a balloon tugging at a restraining string. He was weightless, existing only in a great sea of flashing light pervaded by that terrible, soul-shattering whine.

He was weightless, being turned inside out; there was a sick screaming horror inside him and a rat in a cage, dirty and disgusting, waiting, waiting, waiting—

Something snapped. Like a violin cord. Banning heard it distinctly. Something snapped, and the whinning scream ceased, the light stopped flashing, and he was floating free in a great white shaft that inclosed him, light as a feather.

He drifted through space to the edge of the shaft, tried to tear it aside. It gave before him, but he could not rip it. He beat at it with his fists—and that little segment of his mind shot back to the sight he had seen a few minutes ago. An empty white cone of cloth pulsing as if something within was trying to escape—

Then it began to grow dark. A sense of being pulled at came to him. He struggled against it, but it grew darker and darker, and he was being pulled harder and harder, remorselessly, inevitably. He was being dragged down and squeezed into something, forced into something by an invisible power he could not fight against. He—

Then final darkness, and for a while unconsciousness.

When Banning opened his eyes again, he was back in the same position he had been in the first time he had come to consciousness in this room. But now he was able to move. The paralysis no longer held his limbs, his muscles, his will.

He rolled over, to get up, to make a dash for liberty. And then he remembered.

He looked down at his arms, and saw gray-furred legs. He looked at his body, and saw sleek fur. He pawed at his face, and felt the pointed furry countenance of a rat.

Banning screamed, and the sound came forth to his ears as a shrill squeak. He flung himself from the operating table, and struck the floor heavily on his side. Inside him there was a churned-up, dreadful horror, mixed with clear-headed sagacity and the knowledge he must escape. The horror of the man he had been, and the native sagacity of the rat he was, battling. As they would always battle.

He wanted to fling himself about, scream, yell, shout out this terror that was in his soul, but instead he scampered across the floor, began to dash aloug the floor boards, seeking a hole, seeking an escape to the sewers and the filth that were his life and his doom forever more—

In his little office, Dr. Nicholas Dete took up his telephone.

"Hello," he said, when he had gotten his long-distance number. "Is this Burke? Dete speaking. Sorry to disturb you this time of night. But I knew you'd want to know I've collared the whole gang who kidnaped my son. Yes, five of them—

"I'll give you the details later. I've been on their trail for months. Ever since my assistant picked up the clue from a remark overheard by the Filipino houseboy of the leader. No, I didn't tell your office. There was no evidence, and I wasn't sure you'd find any. Besides, I wanted to handle things my own way.

"No, no, nothing like that. They're all perfectly sound, physically. They'll probably live many years—since we don't have capital punishment in this State, and solitary confinement is the worst they'll get. No, I had no trouble. . . . I said I'll have to give you the details later. It's a long story. I didn't really do it alone, anyway. The whole university helped. Without knowing, of course.

"It's surprising, though, what a fund of scientific weapons against crime a man can dig up in a big university. As a matter of fact, I only needed two or three. The new anæsthetic they've been developing at University Hospital helped a lot, though. It's amazing stuff. You release it in a room, or close to a man's face, and he inhales it without even knowing it. Until all of a sudden without warning he keels over. You can keep him under with it as long as you like. It has a mild hypnotic effect. Marvelous thing. You can be in the room with him, and if you can hold your breath sixty seconds or so until he goes under—

"Well, I'll tell you all about it when you come. Right now I've got four of the gang waiting for you on ice. Unconscious all of them. Sleeping like logs. In the cellar. Perfectly safe—barred in. Prepared the place for them long ago. Have written confessions from three of them. Of course, I got the confessions under hypnosis, but they signed them when they were quite conscious. The psychology department—my old department—supplied the necessary apparatus for the hypnosis work. And for a little more, too. A few tricks—quite simple, really, but effective.

"And my own knowledge of psychology did the rest. Really, there wasn't any special difficulty at any point. They did just what I anticipated in every instance.

"Yes, I said four. The fifth one is Banning. Chuck Banning, he's called. Local dandy. Gambler. You know him? Oh. . . . Yes, I have him, too. But not asleep. No—"

Dr. Nicholas Dete, the rabbity, inoffensive, unimpressive-looking little man turned to gaze through his trick mirror into his laboratory, where the thing that had been Chuck Banning was scrambling frantically around the room, looking for a means of escape.

"No," he said into the phone, "he won't go into solitary. You'll have to reserve a special cell for him at the asylum. He's quite mad. Hopelessly so. He thinks he's a rat. And he hates rats, you know. Dreads and detests them. So. . . . Well, a strait jacket, I think, as long as he lives. No, not nice to think about. Not at all. But then, there are other things that aren't nice to think about either, aren't there?"

Slowly Nicholas Dete replaced the receiver. Beside him, José, a very clever man with animals, able to train them to do almost anything, was staring through the mirror at Chuck Banning who, his eyes rolling, his lips writhing in a continuous choked whimpering, still was scrambling on hands and knees from one side of the room to the other in his frantic search for escape. José's countenance reflected a certain horror. But the buck-toothed, rabbity countenance of Dr. Nicholas Dete was stern and unmoved.

THE END.

The Devil Is Not Mocked

by Manly Wade Wellman

Transylvania has known many invaders, many conquerors—and yet has its defenders that remain unkilled, their ranks recruited from the enemy.

Illustrated by Alfred

Do you not know that tonight, when the clock strikes midnight, all the evil things in the world hold sway? Do you know where you are going, and what you are going to?

BRAM STOKER.

Balkan weather, even Balkan spring weather, was not pleasant to General von Grunn, leaning heavily back behind the bulletproof glass of his car. May 4th—the English would call it St. George's Day, after their saint who was helping them so little. The date would mean something to Heinrich Himmler, too; that weak-chinned pet of the Fuehrer would hold some sort of garbled druidic ritual with his Schutzstaffel on the Brockenburg. Von Grunn grimaced fatly at thought of Himmler, and leaned forward to look out into the night. An armed car ahead, an armed car behind—all was well.

"Forward!" he growled to his orderly, Kranz, who trod on the accelerator. The car moved, and the car ahead took the lead, into the Borgo Pass.

Von Grunn glanced backward once, to the lights of Bistritz. This country had been Rumanian not so long ago. Now it was Hungarian, which meant that it was German.

What was it that the mayor of Bistritz had said, when he had demanded a semiremote headquarters? The castle along this pass, empty—ready for him? The dolt had seemed eager to help, to please. Von Grunn produced a long cigarette. Young Captain Plesser, sitting beside him, at once kindled a lighter. Slim, quiet, the young aid had faded from von Grunn's consciousness.

"What's the name of that castle again?" inquired the general, and made a grimace when Plesser replied in barbarous Slavic syllables. "What's the meaning in a civilized tongue?"

"Devil's castle, I should think," hazarded the captain's respectful voice.

"*Ach*, so—Transylvania is supposed

to be overrun with devils," nodded von Grunn, puffing. "Let them defer to us, or we'll devil them." He smiled, for his was a great gift for appreciating his own epigrams. "Meanwhile, let the castle be called its German name. *Teufelstoss*—Devil's Castle."

"Of course," agreed Plesser.

Silence for a while, as the cars purred powerfully up the rough slope of the pass trail. Von Grunn lost himself in his favorite meditation—his own assured future. He was to establish an unostentatious command post for—what? A move against Russia? The Black Sea? He would know soon enough. In any case, an army would be his, action and glory. There was glory enough for all. Von Grunn remembered Wilhelm II saying that, in the last war.

"The last war," he said aloud. "I was a simple oberlieutenant then. And the Fuehrer—a corporal. What were you, captain?"

"A child."

"You remember?"

"Nothing." Plesser screwed up his courage to a question. "General von Grunn, does it not seem strange that the folk at Bistritz were so anxious for you to come to the castle—*Teufelstoss*—tonight?"

Von Grunn nodded, like a big fierce owl. "You smell a trap, *nicht wahr?* That is why I bring two carloads of men, my trusted bodyguard. For that very chance. But I doubt if any in Transylvania dare set traps for me, or any other German."

The cars were slowing down. General and captain leaned forward. The car ahead was passing through the great open gateway of a courtyard. Against the spattered stars rose the silhouette of a vast black building, with a broken tower. "We seem to be here," ventured Captain Plesser.

"Good. Go to the forward car. When the other arrives, form the guard."

It was done swiftly. Sixteen stark infantrymen were marshaled, with rifles, bombs, and submachine guns. Von Grunn emerged into the cold night, and Kranz, the orderly, began to bring out the luggage.

"A natural fort, withdrawn and good for any defense except against aircraft," pronounced the general, peering through his monocle at the battlements above. "We will make a thorough examination.

"*Unteroffizer!*" he barked, and the noncom in charge of the escort came forward woodenly, stiffening to attention. "Six of the men will accompany me inside. You will bivouac the others in this courtyard, maintaining a guard all night. *Heil Hitler.*"

"*Heil Hitler,*" responded the man briskly. Von Grunn smiled as the *unteroffizer* strode away to obey. For all the soldierly alacrity, that order to sleep outdoors was no welcome one. So much the better; von Grunn believed in toughening experiences for field soldiers, and his escort had lived too softly since the Battle of Flanders.

He walked to where a sort of vestibule of massive rough stone, projected from the castle wall. Plesser already stood there, staring at the heavy nail-studded planks of the door. "It is locked, *Herr General,*" he reported. "No knob or latch, bell or knocker—"

But as he spoke, the door swung creakingly inward, and yellow light gushed out.

On the threshold stood a figure in black, as tall as von Grunn himself but thinner than even Plesser. A pale, sharp face and brilliant eyes turned upon them, in the light of a chimneyless oil lamp of silver.

"Welcome, General von Grunn," said the lamp holder. "You are expected."

His German was good, his manner respectful. Von Grunn's broad hand slid into a greatcoat pocket, where he always carried a big automatic pistol.

"Who told you to expect us?" he demanded.

The lamplight struck blue radiance from smooth, sparse black hair as the thin man bowed. "Who could mistake General von Grunn, or doubt that he would want this spacious, withdrawn structure for his new headquarters position?"

The mayor of Bistritz, officious ass, must have sent this fellow ahead to make fawning preparations—but even as von Grunn thought that, the man himself gave other information.

"I am in charge here, have been in charge for many years. We are so honored to have company. Will the general enter?"

He stepped back. Plesser entered, then von Grunn. The vestibule was warm. "This way, excellency," said the man with the lamp—the steward, von Grunn decided to classify him. He led the way along a stone-paved passage, von Grunn's escort tramping authoritatively after him. Then up a great winding stair, and into a room, a big hall of a place, with a fire of logs

and a table set for supper.

All told, very inviting; but it was not von Grunn's way to say as much. He only nodded, and allowed Captain Plesser to help him out of his great-coat. Meanwhile, the steward was showing the luggage-laden Kranz into an octagonal bedroom beyond.

"Take these six men," said von Grunn to Plesser, indicating the soldiers of the escort. "Tour the castle. Make a plan of each floor. Then come back and report. *Heil Hitler.*"

"Heil Hitler," and Plesser led the party away. Von Grunn turned his broad back to the fire. Kranz was busy within the bedroom, arranging things. The steward returned. "May I serve the *Herr General?*" he asked silkily.

Von Grunn looked at the table, and with difficulty forebore to lick his fat lips. There were great slices of roast beef, a fowl, cheese, salad, and two bottles of wine—Kranz himself could not have guessed better what would be good. Von Grunn almost started forward to the table, then paused. This was Transylvania. The natives, for all their supple courtesy, disliked and feared soldiers of the Reich. Might these good things not be poisoned?

"Remove these things," he said bleakly. "I have brought my own provisions. You may eat that supper yourself."

Another bow. "The *Herr General* is too good; but I will sup at midnight—it is not long. Now, I will clear the things away. Your man will fetch what you want."

He began to gather up dishes. Watching him stoop over the table, von Grunn thought that he had seldom seen anyone so narrow in the shoulders—they were humped high, like the shoulders of a hyena, suggesting a power that crouched and lurked. Von Grunn was obliged to tell himself that he was not repelled or nervous. The steward was a stranger, a Slav of some kind. It was von Grunn's business to be scornful of all such.

"Now," he said, when all was cleared, "go to the bedroom and tell my orderly—" He broke off. "What was that?"

The other listened. Von Grunn could have sworn that the man's ears—pale and pointed—lifted voluntarily, like the ears of a cat or a fox. The sound came again, a prolonged howl in the distance.

"The wolves," came the quiet reply. "They speak to the full moon."

"Wolves?" The general was intrigued at once. He was a sportsman—that is, he liked to corner and kill beasts almost as much as he liked to corner and kill men. As a guest of Hermann Goering he had shot two very expensive wild bulls, and he yearned for the day when the Fuehrer would graciously invite him to the Black Forest for pigsticking. "Are there many?" he asked. "It sounds like many. If they were not so far—"

"They come nearer," his companion said, and indeed the howl was repeated more strongly and clearly. "But you gave an order, general?"

"Oh, yes." Von Grunn remembered his hunger. "My man will bring me supper from among the things we have with us."

A bow, and the slender black figure moved noiselessly into the bedroom. Von Grunn crossed the floor and seated himself in an armchair before the table. The steward returned, and stood at hi elbow.

"Pardon. Your orderly helped me carry the other food to the castle kitchen. He has not returned, and so I took the liberty of serving you."

He had a tray. Upon it were delicacies from von Grunn's mess chest—slices of smoked turkey, buttered bread, preserved fruits, bottled beer. The fellow had arranged them himself, had had every opportunity to . . . to—

Von Grunn scowled and took the monocle from his eye. The danger of poison again stirred in his mind, and

he had difficulty scorning it. He must eat and drink, in defiance of fear.

Poison or no poison, the food was splendid, and the steward an excellent waiter. The general drank beer, and deigned to say, "You are an experienced servant?"

The pale, sharp face twitched sidewise in negation. "I serve very few guests. The last was years ago—Jonathan Harker, an Englishman—"

Von Grunn snorted away mention of that unwelcome people, and finished his repast. Then he rose, and stared around. The wolves howled again, in several directions and close to the castle.

"I seem to be deserted," he said grimly. "The captain is late, my orderly late. My men make no report." He stepped to the door, opened it. "Plesser!" he called. "Captain Plesser!"

No reply.

"Shall I bring you to him?" asked the steward gently. Once again, he had come up close. Von Grunn started violently, and wheeled.

The eyes of the steward were on a level with his, and very close. For the first time von Grunn saw that they were filled with green light. The steward was smiling, too, and von Grunn saw his teeth—white, spaced widely, pointed—

As if signaled by the thought, the howling of the beasts outside broke out afresh. It was deafeningly close. To von Grunn it sounded like hundreds. Then, in reply, came a shout, the voice of the *unteroffiser* uttering a quick, startled command.

At once a shot. Several shots.

The men he had encamped in the courtyard were shooting at something.

With ponderous haste, von Grunn hurried from the room, down the stairs. As he reached the passageway below, he heard more shots, and a wild air-rending chorus of howls, growls, spitting scuffles. Von Grunn gained the door by which he had entered. Something moved in the gloom at his very feet.

A chalky face turned up, the face of Captain Plesser. A hand lifted shakily to clutch at the general's boot top.

"Back in there, the dark rooms—" It was half a choke, half a sigh. "They're devils—hungry—they got the others, got me— I could come no farther than this—"

Plesser collapsed. Light came from behind von Grunn, and he could see the captain's head sagging backward on the stone. The side of the slender neck had been torn open, but blood did not come. For there was no blood left in Captain Plesser's body.

Outside, there was sudden silence. Stepping across Plesser's body, the general seized the latch and pushed the door open.

The courtyard was full of wolves, feeding. One glance was enough to show what they fed on. As von Grunn stared, the wolves lifted their heads and stared back. He saw many green-glowing eyes, level, hard, hungry, many grinning mouths with pointed teeth—the eyes and the teeth of the steward.

He got the door shut again, and sagged upon it, breathing hard.

"I am sorry, general," came a soft, teasing apology. "Sorry—my servants were too eager within and without. Wolves and vampires are hard to restrain. After all, it is midnight—our moment of all moments."

"What are you raving about?" gasped von Grunn, feeling his jaw sag.

"I do not rave. I tell simple truth. My castle has vampires within, wolves without, all my followers and friends—"

Von Grunn felt for a weapon. His great coat was upstairs, the pistol in its pocket.

"Who are you?" he screamed.

"I am Count Dracula of Transylvania," replied the gaunt man in black.

He set down the lamp carefully before moving forward.

THE END.

Eight Ball

by Hugh Raymond

The making of these carved ivory balls-within-balls is an art, no doubt. But it seems there's a certain trick to it, a trick that, if it goes wrong, does not put you behind the eight ball exactly, rather—

Illustrated by Kelliher.

Carrying Professor Quoit home was no cinch. He was heavy, bulky, unwieldy and smelly. Besides he was drunk. Stewed to the mouth of the gills. And tangled something awful in a billowy spring overcoat. I opened the front door, groped around in the darkness with one hand for the switch and shoved the professor against the wall with the other. He swayed and almost fell. But the lights went on abruptly and I caught him. He lurched again, but Pooh Bah was on the job. I heaved him conscientiously into the living room.

It's not exactly my job. Quoit holds down the chair of Oriental Art at Cosmopolitan University—when he isn't stiff as a board which is almost all the time. I'm an Egyptologist myself—beautiful sounding title, isn't it? We're a dime a dozen, so don't let's kid ourselves—and I can assume the job of No. 1 boy without danger of lese majesty.

You've just got to be nice to the professor. He laughs most of the time and spends the rest proving that life is the best thing in life. Everybody loves him to death. He's essentially the Robert Benchley type—sober and drunk both—and cute as a kitten.

Nobody ever tries to make him stop drinking. He went on the wagon once for a week and promptly fell into sixteen distinct and quivering pieces. "A highball is better than a squall," he is used to saying, paraphrasing Aldous Huxley.

Why he drinks I can't say. He seldom talks of his private affairs. It is known that he once had a lovely wife and three beautiful children in China. Something terrible happened there. Something like the plague or maybe it was the bombing of Shanghai. He came home without them. And so help me Amenhotep they have nothing to do with *the* story.

This particular evening we'd spent at

Arnoldi's, which the New York readers may remember is the place in Greenwich Village where congregate down-at-the-heel authors, threadbare artists, dismembered poets, discarded vice presidents of colleges and boogie-woogie players anxious to acquire some tone. Why Quoit liked the place, I don't know. He kept dragging me around to sit by the hour in its taproom and be bored to death listening to the birdlike chirping of its denizens. Quoit drank three straight Scotches the minute he got settled behind the table and kept ordering double brandies all evening. He met his Waterloo on the twentieth.

He lay on the couch where I dumped him and went to the wall to turn on the parlor lights. As they lit up the place with their mellow glow, he opened his eyes, turned them around the room like marbles stuck on sticks and yelped suddenly.

"My rubber ball!" He sat up with a jerk, the color draining out of his face and threw his hands into the air, "Andy, my rubber ball!"

I came out of the kitchen sour-faced, disinclined to fool around any more and decidedly annoyed.

"What rubber ball?" I bellowed, pitching my hat and coat onto a nearby chair and diving for him. He was already on his hands and knees crawling toward a curiously colored ball which rolled out of the south bedroom and hopped across the floor to meet him.

I knew instantaneously that something was amiss. I had imbibed enough alcohol to make me stutter once or twice at Arnoldi's, but I was cold sober now. This was on a par with Pixies and little men who suddenly appear to clean out the icebox or else your shoes won't be cobbled by morning or the cow will die.

"What rubber ball?" The words died on my lips as it came into sight, *hopping* and hopping straight to Quoit. The strangled look came out of his eyes as he caught it on a short fly, took it into his arms and caressed it like the bald pate of a baby.

I am a man of few words and quick action. Quoit lay on the floor with the ball exactly twenty seconds. Three minutes later he was in the bathtub immersed to the chin and toenails in icy water. I emptied the icebox into the tub and had him uncoiled within two hours.

"Oh, that—" he said offhandedly to a question of mine as he staggered out of the bathroom. His eyes caught the ball again. It was still laying on the floor where I'd put it after forcing it from his grasp. He tightened his bathrobe belt, walked over to it, picked it up and again cradled the thing. He pointed to it with one hand and raised it in the other, squeezing its smooth contours.

"Meet Asun Poy, professor; professor," he winked at me, "meet Asun Poy." He collapsed suddenly on the couch and held his hands to his temples for a while. The ball, having dropped from his grasp, bounced once or twice on the floor, gained impetus and landed beside him with a soft *plop*. It seemed to cuddle close.

He looked up again and crooked a finger. I came and sat down.

"Andy," he said, tragically, "you are the possessor of many of my secrets." He put one hand into his robe and assumed the air of a Shakespearean ham. "You shall presently know another. A moment, I beg of you, of rest and quiet." He put his fingers to his head again and stayed that way for several minutes.

I lit a cigarette.

"Andy—"

I looked up. He was sitting back gazing dreamily at the wall. One hand caressed the ball.

"Remember the China Trade and Its Influences exhibit?"

I nodded. He was referring to an exhibition of Oriental art we had seen

a few days previously at the Cosmopolitan Museum.

"Remember the ivory ball, Andy? You couldn't understand how they managed to carve seven small balls within the big one, each inside the other?"

I was instantly alert. As I recalled through the haze of several days, the problem had been tantalizing. The image formed slowly in my mind. A giant pierced ball of ivory decorated with intricate carvings. Within the outside shell, which was approximately an eighth of an inch thick, were seven small spheres each smaller than the other and working down to a tiny solid sphere at the very center of the whole thing; a contemporary piece and gorge-

ously carved. A riddle, too. The successive shells were uncut and finished on the inside as well as the outer surface. It had looked like an impossibility. I remembered suddenly Quoit's amused smile in answer to a question I had put concerning their construction. So!

He held his free hand on my knee.

"Asun Poy, Asun Poy—" he breathed heavily, "he was a Russian-Chinese—"

I took a deep breath and settled back. Quoit's face had assumed the stern look which preceded his lectures.

"He was a Russian-Chinese," I repeated as he paused.

"He lived in Shanghai," continued Quoit, "and he was a very strange man. Mary liked him and the kids liked him. He was about my build, but shorter, and he spoke English with a Russian accent. I met him early in '29. That was on my first trip to China. That was when I brought back old Chung's funeral pieces—the ones they've salted away on the third floor. Mary had a suite in the Imperial. I used to go into the interior every four weeks and pick up a couple of tons of gilded bric-a-brac. Two or three ounces of it were genuine. I met him in a little village about six hundred miles to the west. The Japs bombed it two weeks ago, I think. It was called H'Aning Po and it was at the junction of two small rivers. Asun Poy was standing at the dock one afternoon as I was bargaining with my local agent over a sack of junk. I was arguing loudly and my agent was doing the same, and it began to look as though I'd never get the one valuable bit I wanted. Asun Poy walked up to the Chinese and spoke a few words. I looked at him curiously. His was a strange face in that part of the country—long, gaunt, Eurasian, with a hint of French in his eyes. His skin was very white. His hands were long and spatulate. I listened to his talk for a while, then as the agent suddenly turned and gave in, I tipped my pith helmet and thanked him in English.

"'That's all right,' he said cheerfully in a Russian accent and held out his hand. 'I'm Asun Poy.'

"I learned later, while strolling down the river bank with my precious funeral urn in one hand—the rest I'd dumped back into the Va'ho—that he was also an Orientologist mainly interested in Gobi fossils and Ch'u pottery, which is rather scarce and not worth the while of any but a disinterested man. Asun Poy was disinterested. He had money by the bucket. He told me about his early life, people in the East, as you know, dissolve their barriers as soon as trust is established—he was the son of a Russian mother and a Chinese father, which had helped.

"He'd had a long and interesting artistic life spent mostly in Russia before the Bolshies took over and was a good friend of Karl Faberge, the emperor's private jeweler. His present pursuits were the Gobi fossils. The trip to H'Aning Po was sentimental. His mother was buried there.

"I left him at the hotel with the request that he call on me at any time for any assistance I was able to give and returned to my own diggings." Quoit picked the ball up and shook it. "Ah, there, Asun," he said cheerfully and placed it on the couch again a few inches away. Again it snuggled close to his side.

"Get on about Asun," I remarked and lit another cigarette.

"I heard from him the next morning. He sent a boy up to my shack with a chit. It read something like: 'You'll be interested at Shu Pai's shop. I was. Meet me there at noon.'

"Shu Pai was the proprietor of a small junk shop in the middle of town just off the main mud puddle. I dashed around—it was almost twelve. Asun was standing outside talking to Shu Pai who was a very short, chunky native of Kansu. I had difficulty following his dialect which was inter-

spersed with pidgin English. Asun took me by the arm.

"'I think you'll like this.' He nodded to Shu Pai and we went inside. The interior was dusty. Both Asun and I kept carefully away from the musty wares, for we were both wearing spotless white. Shu Pai lit a lantern, went in the back of his hovel and returned an instant later with an ordinary cardboard box the size of a shoe carton. This he placed on the table. He took off the top and rolled out a large ivory globe, practically the exact duplicate of the one at the China Trade. I examined it carefully, while Asun Poy watched amused. Presently I looked up, puzzled, and asked the expected question.

"'You would be surprised,' answered Asun in good American vernacular. He motioned to Shu Pai.

"'Show the man, Shu Pai,' he said. 'Show the American professor how the little ivory balls get into each other.' When he had finished talking, he stepped back and drew me with him.

For a moment, Shu Pai looked as though he wasn't going to do it, then Asun Poy laid a large metal coin on the table. He smiled oilily, picked up the globe and posed it above the lantern, turning it slowly.

"'Melican fello look,' he lisped. I leaned closer and fixed my gaze on his pudgy hands. He held the globe tightly by two of his fingers. It gleamed in the soft light of the lantern.

"'Melican fello look,' he repeated and extended his free hand toward the globe. Nothing happened. He reached out a finger, cocked it several times like a double-jointed man cracking his thumb and then made a few swift passes. I couldn't follow them. But suddenly his hand disappeared. It reappeared so quickly that I had no time to form an accurate mind picture of the exact appearance of the juncture of his wrist and the outer shell of the ball.

I staggered back. Asun Poy smiled.

"'Amazing, isn't it?' he drawled in his Russian accent.

"'What the devil did he do?' I demanded, pointing to the solid ivory ball the size of a marble Shu Pai laid on the table beside the big ball which he replaced in the box.

"'He got it,' replied Asun. 'He got the core. Look at the ball—each one is pierced—you can count them. There should be seven. There were eight before. There's the eighth.' He pointed to the ivory marble.

"I got excited.

"'Make him do it again,' I demanded, and put another large coin in front of Shu Pai, who looked up and barked a few words at Asun.

"'He won't do it again!' said Asun, turning again to me. 'He says that no Occidental must learn the secret. All this is nonsense, of course, because he's going to teach it to me. Want to learn?'

"My nod was interrupted by another series of barks from Shu Pai.

"I waited for them to subside and looked at Asun. He was mildly surprised.

"'What did he say?'

"'Amazing,' laughed Asun Poy. 'The little man warns me that the technique is dangerous. A little too far or not far enough and he say I'm likely to go out like a candle. Be a good fellow and go away, now, professor. Shu Pai is going to pedagogue.'

"It was fantastic hearing him roll off Americanese in his quaint Slavic accent. He waved a finger at me.

"'Come around to the hotel tomorrow morning. I'll show you then.'

"I went home slowly."

"I didn't get around to the hotel until late the following afternoon, despite my intense curiosity. A telegram from Mary that the kids were sick with measles kept me busy at the wires for hours. When I finally got through

recommending every doctor in Shanghai I remembered Asun and went around. They rang his room—imagine electric bells in a two-story hotel in an overgrown mud hole in the middle of China. He didn't answer. They told me he hadn't been down all morning. I waited for about an hour, then decided to go upstairs.

"His door was locked, but as nobody was looking, I forced it—easily enough, as it was made out of wet bamboo. Asun wasn't there—at least noticeably. The room was piled high with boxes of stuff he'd been collecting from the neighborhood. On the floor was a pile of clothes—the same he was wearing when I saw him last. Beside it was a large rubber ball—this one.

"As soon as I turned my eyes on it, the ball started to move toward me—like this."

The professor threw the ball to the opposite side of the floor. It remained there momentarily, then began hopping back. My blood went cold. I distinctly felt wet fingers coursing down my spine. The ball stopped at our feet.

"Just like that," Quoit continued, "hopping and bouncing right into my hands. Asun was in it, of course. It came to me in a flash. He'd gone too far—or not far enough. The ball was merely something he was experimenting on."

I sat quietly for a while, smoking a third cigarette.

"If he's in there," I said, finally, "why don't you get him out?"

Quoit chuckled, but suddenly his face went cold and gray.

"I had it X-rayed. Nothing showed on the plate. I had it cut open. It was *empty*. I resealed it."

"But you said Asun Poy was in it."

He looked at me hopelessly for a moment, then a light of humor kindled again in his eyes.

"Yeah," he said and pressed the ball affectionately.

THE END.

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She said, "There's something following me!" in a throttled voice, and started to run.

It sort of got me. Maybe because she was so tiny and her hair was so white. Maybe because, white hair and all, she looked so young and helpless. But mostly, I think, because of what she said. "There's something following me." Not "someone." "Something." So I just naturally hauled out after her.

I caught her at the corner, put my hand on her shoulder. She gasped, and shot away from me. "Take it easy, lady," I panted. "I won't let it get you."

She stopped so suddenly that I almost ran her down. We stood looking at each other. She had great big dark eyes that didn't go with her hair at all. I said, "What makes you go dashing around at three o'clock of a winter's morning?"

"What makes you ask?" Her voice was smooth, musical.

"Now, look—you started this conversation."

She started to speak, and then something over my shoulder caught her eye. She froze for a second; and I was so fascinated by the play of expression in her face that I didn't follow her gaze. Abruptly she brought her eyes back to my face and then slapped it. It was a stinger. I stepped back and swore, and by the time I was finished she was halfway up the block. I stood there rubbing my cheek and let her go.

I met Henry Gade a couple of days later and told him about it. Henry is a practical psychologist. Perhaps I should say his field is practical psychology, because Henry ain't practical. He has theories. He has more damn theories than any man alive. He is thirty and bald and he makes lots of money without doing any work.

"I think she was crazy," I said.

"Ah," said Henry, and laid a finger

beside his nose. I think the nose was longer. "But did you ask her what *she* thought?"

"No. I only asked her what she was doing running around that time of night."

"The trouble with you, Gus, is that you have no romance in you. What you should have done was to catch her up in your arms and smother her with kisses."

"She'd have sla—"

"She did, anyway, didn't she?" said Henry, and walked off.

Henry kids a lot. But he sometimes says crazy things like that when he isn't kidding a bit.

I met the girl again three months later, when it was spring. I was in the Duke's beer garden looking at his famous sunflower. The sunflower was twelve feet tall and had crutches to keep it standing up. It grew beside the dirt alley that was the main road of the beer garden. There were ratty-looking flowerbeds all over the place and tables set between them. And Japanese lanterns that had been out in the rain, and a laryngitic colored band. The place was crowded, and I was standing there letting all that noise beat me back and forth, looking at the sunflower. The Duke swore he could fill a No. 6 paper bag with the seeds from that one flower.

And then she said, "Hello. I'm sorry I had to slap your face." She was squinched up against the stem of the sunflower, in amongst all those shadows and leaves.

I said, "Well, if it isn't my pretty little pug. What do you mean, you're sorry you *had* to? You should be just sorry you did."

"Oh, I had to. I wouldn't slap you just for nothing."

"Oh—I did something? I shoulda got slapped?"

"Please," she said. "I am sorry."

I looked at her. She was. "What are you doing in there—hiding?"

She nodded.

"Who are you hiding from?"

She wouldn't say. She just shrugged and said she was just—you know—hiding.

"Is it the same thing you were running away from that night?"

"Yes."

I told her she was being silly. "I looked all around after you left and there wasn't a thing on the street."

"Oh, yes there was!"

"Not that I could see."

"I know that."

I suddenly got the idea that this was a very foolish conversation. "Come out of there and have a beer with me. We'll talk this thing over."

"Oh, I couldn't do that!"

"Sure you could. Easy. Look." I reached in and grabbed her.

"You should know better than that," she said, and then something happened to break the stem of the big sunflower. It tottered and came crashing down like a redwood. The huge flower landed on the tray that Guiseppe, the waiter, was carrying. It held eight long beers, two pitchers and a Martini. The beers and a lot of broken glass flew in every direction but up. The Martini went back over his head and crashed on the bars of the cage where the Duke kept his trained squirrel. There was some confusion. The girl with the white hair was gone. All the time that the Duke was telling me what a menace I was, I kept staring over his heaving shoulder at the squirrel, which was lapping up the Martini that had splashed inside the cage. After the Duke ran out of four-letter words he had me thrown out. We'd been pretty good friends before that, too.

I got hold of Henry as soon as I could. "I saw that girl again," I told him, "and I grabbed her like you said." I told him what had happened. He laughed at me. Henry always laughs at me.

"Don't look so solemn about it, Gus!" he said, and slapped me on the back.

"A little excitement is good for the blood. Laugh it off. The Duke didn't sue you, did he?"

"No," I said, "not exactly. But that squirrel of his ate the cherry out of that cocktail that fell into his cage and got awful sick. And the Duke went and had the doctor send his bill to me. Stomach pump."

Henry had been eating salted nuts, and when I said that he snorted half a mouthful of chewed nuts up into his nose. I've done that and it hurts. In a way I was glad to see Henry suffer.

"I need some help," I told him after he got his health back. "Maybe that girl's crazy, but I think she's in trouble."

"She most certainly is," said Henry. "But I don't see what you could do about it."

"Oh, I'd figure out something."

"I also don't see why you want to help her out."

"That's a funny thing," I said slowly. "You know me, Henry—I got no use for wimmen unless they leave me alone. Every time one of 'em does something nice, it's because she's figgerin' to pull something lousy a little later."

Henry swallowed some cashews carefully and then laughed. "You've summed up at least seven volumes of male objectivism," he said. "But what has that got to do with your silver-haired Nemesis?"

"Nemesis? I thought maybe she was Polish. Her? Well, she's never done anything to me that wasn't lousy. So I figure maybe she's different. I figure maybe she's going to work it the other way around and pull something nice. And I want to be around when that happens."

"Your logic is labored but dependable." He said something else, about what's the use of being intelligent and educated when all wisdom rests on the lips of a child of nature, but I didn't catch on. "Well, I'm rather interested in whether or not you can do anything for her. Go ahead and stick your neck out."

"I don't know where she lives or nothing."

"Oh—that." He pulled out a little notebook and a silver pencil and wrote down something. "Here," he said, tearing it off and handing it to me. It said, "Iola Harvester, 2336 Dungannon Street."

"Who's this?"

"Your damsel in distress. Your dark-eyed slapper of faces."

"Dam— Don't cuss at her, Henry. How the devil do you know her name?"

"She was a patient of mine for quite a while."

"She was? Why, you son-of-a-gun! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't you ask me?"

I started for the door, reading over the name and address. "You know what, Henry?"

"What?"

"Iola's a pretty name."

Henry laughed. "Let me know how you make out."

I went up and rang the bell. It was a big apartment house; Iola lived on the fourth floor. The foyer door belched at me and I pushed it open and went in. They had one of those self-service elevators so I went up the stairs. Those things make me nervous.

She was waiting up on her floor to find out who had rung the bell. She was wearing a black housecoat that touched the floor all the way around and was close around her throat. It had a stiff collar that stuck up and out and seemed to sort of cradle her head. There was a zipper all down the front and two silver initials on the left breast. I couldn't get my wind right away and it wasn't the stairs.

"Oh!" she said. "It's you!"

"Yup." I looked at her for a minute. "Gee! I didn't know you were so *tiny!*" There was something about her that made me want to laugh out loud, but

not because I saw anything funny. When I said that she got pink.

"I . . . don't know whether I should ask you in," she said. "I don't even know your name."

"My name is Gus. So now you can ask me in."

"You're the only man I have ever met who can be fresh without being fresh," she said, and stood aside. I didn't know what she meant, but I went in, anyway. It was a nice place. Everything in it was delicate and small, like Iola. I stood in the middle of the floor spinning my hat on one finger until she took it away from me. "Sit down," she said. I did and she did, with the room between us. "What brings you here; how did you find out my address, and will you have some coffee or a drink?"

"I came because I think you're in a jam and you might need help. A friend of mine gave me your name and address. I don't want any coffee and what have you got to drink?"

"Sauterne," she said. "Rum, rye and Scotch."

"I never *touch* that stuff."

"What do you drink?"

"Gin." She looked startled. "Or milk. Got any milk?"

She had. She got me a great big glass of it. She even had some herself. She said, "Now, what's on your mind?"

"I told you, Miss Iola. I want to help you."

"There's nothing you can do."

"Oh, yes there is. There must be. "If you'll tell me what's botherin' you, making you hide away in . . . in sunflowers and runnin' away from nothing, I'll bet I could fix you up— What are you laughing at?"

"You're so earnest!" she said.

"Everybody's all the time laughing at me," I said sadly. "Well, how about it?"

The smile faded away from her face and she sat for a long time saying nothing. I went and sat beside her and looked at her. I didn't try to touch her at all. Suddenly she nodded and began to talk.

"I might as well tell you. It's tough to keep it to myself. Most people would laugh at me; the one doctor I went to eventually gave me up as a bad job. He said I was kidding myself. He said that what had happened just couldn't happen—I imagined it all. But you—I think I can trust you. I don't know why—

"It started about two years ago. I had a slight crush on a fellow at a summer camp. He took me to a dance one night—one of those country square dances. It was a lot of fun and we danced ourselves tired. Then we went out onto the lakeshore and he—well, the moon and all, you know—he put his arms around me. And just then a voice spoke to me. It said, 'If you know what's good for you, you'll keep away from this fellow.' I started back and asked the boy if he had said something. He hadn't. I was scared and ran all the way home. He tried to catch me, but he couldn't. I saw him the next day and tried to apologize, but there wasn't very much I could say. I tried to be nice to him, but as time went on he got more and more irritable. And he lost weight. He wound up in the hospital. Almost—died. You see, he couldn't sleep. He was afraid to sleep. He had the most terrible dreams. I heard about one of them. It was awful."

"I didn't realize then that my seeing him had anything to do with his getting sick; but as soon as they had him in the hospital he began to get better, fast, as long as I didn't visit him. Then he would have a relapse. I heard that after he left the camp for good and went back to his home in Chicago, he was quite all right.

"Well, nothing happened for quite a while, and then I began to notice that a counterman at a sandwich bar where I ate every day had begun to act strangely. I saw him every day, but there was absolutely nothing between us. One afternoon while I was eating, he began dropping things. It was nothing at first, but it got very bad. It got so that he couldn't lift so much as a spoon without dropping it. He spilled cup after cup of coffee. He would try to make a sandwich and he'd drop the makings all over the floor and his work table. He couldn't set a place at the counter, he couldn't wait on anybody—*as long as I was there!* At first he kidded about it and called me his jinx girl. But after a week or so of that, he came over to me just as I sat down and said:

" 'Miss Harvester, I hope you don't mind what I'm going to say, but something's got to be done. I'll lose my job if I don't stop dropping things. But I never do that unless you're here! I don't know why it is, but there you have it. Would you be angry if I asked you not to eat here for a while?' I was astonished, but he was so worried and so polite about it that I never ate there again. And from what I've heard my friends say, he never dropped anything again.

"And from then on it got worse and worse. A traffic cop, a nice old man, that I used to nod to each morning on my way to work, began to *itch!* I could see it, every time I passed him! I'd nod, and he'd nod, and then start to scratch as if he itched so badly he just couldn't help himself. And an office boy who spent a lot of time near my desk began to miss doors! I mean, he just couldn't get through a door without running into the jamb. The poor boy almost went crazy. He'd walk slowly toward a door, aim carefully, and try to go through, but he couldn't do it unless he struck the jamb first. I got so heartsick watching him that I quit my job and got another—which took care of

the nice policeman, too. Neither of them were ever troubled again.

"But that's the way it's been ever since. Any man I see regularly starts suffering dreadfully from some strange trouble. It's bad enough for the ones who just see me in a routine way. But oh, the poor men who try to take me out to shows and things! When I go out, that strange voice speaks to me again, and tells me to keep away from the man. And if I don't, he gets terribly sick, or he gets blind spells when he crosses any streets, or he does things that cause him to lose his job or his business. Do you see what I'm up against?"

"Don't cry, Miss Iola. Please don't cry."

"I'm *n*-not crying, Mr. Gus!"

"Just plain Gus!"

"Well then, you call me just plain Iola. Or Miss Harvester. Not Miss Iola."

"I'd have to feel a certain way about you to call you Iola," I said slowly. "And I'd have to feel a certain other way about you to call you Miss Harvester. I'm goin' to call you Miss Iola."

"Oh, Gus," she said, "you're so *cute!*" She smiled and sipped some milk and then went on with her story.

"I work now for a woman who owns a cosmetic business," she said. "I have a woman boss and a woman manager and office force and mostly women customers. And I hate them! I hate all women!"

"Me, too," I said.

She gave me an odd glance, and went on. "Once in a while I'm free of this thing. I can't tell you exactly how I know, but I do. It's a sort of lightening of pressure. And then I'll be walking along the street and I can feel it trying to catch up with me—just as if it had hunted me out and was following me. Sometimes I can hide and get away from it. Generally I can't."

"Oh—that's why you were running away that night I first saw you! But—why did you slap my face?"

"Because I liked you."

"That's a funny sort of way to show it, Miss Iola."

"Oh, no! The thing, whatever it is, had just caught up with me. It knew I liked you. It would have done some terrible thing to you if I hadn't slapped you to make it think I disliked you. And after I had done it I was so ashamed I ran away."

"Why did you break the stem of the sunflower?"

"Gus, I didn't! The thing did that, to get you in trouble."

"Sure did that."

"Oh, Gus—I'm so sorry."

"What for? Not your fault."

"Not— Gus, you believe me, don't you?"

"Why, sure!" I said, surprised. "Why not?"

She kissed me. Just a little one, on the cheek, but it made my heart pop up into the back of my neck and slug me.

"Well," I said as soon as I could make my breathing operate my voice, "whatever this thing is, I'll help you lick it. Ah—what is it, by the way? Got any ideas?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I certainly have. When I told the doctor this, it convinced him that I was suffering from an overdose of old-wives' tales. Doesn't it seem funny to you that after all I've told you about what happens to a man if I so much as talk to him, nothing is happening to you?"

"Come to think of it, it is funny."

"Look, then," she said, pointing. "There, and there, and there!"

I looked. Over the tops of the three doors that opened into the room, and over the two big windows, were strands of—garlic.

"I . . . heard of that," I said. "A ghost, huh?"

"A ghost," said Iola. "A jealous ghost. A dirty, rotten dog-in-the-

manger ghost! Why doesn't he leave me alone?"

"I'll tear'm apart," I growled.

She smiled, the saddest, puckered-up little smile I ever did see. "No, Gus, no. You're strong, all right, but that kind of strength won't do me much good with my haunt."

"I'll find some way, Miss Iola," I said. "I will, so help me!"

"You'll try," she said softly. "So help *me!*"

She got my hat and opened the door for me, then closed it with a bang, whirled and stood with her back to it. "Gus!" She was pale, anyway, but now she looked bloodless. "Gus. He's out there! The ghost—he knows you're in here, and he's waiting for you!"

I looked at my hands. "Move on out of the way, then, Miss Iola," I said quietly, "and let me at him."

"No, Gus—no!"

"Now, looky here. It's getting late—too late for you to have my kind in your digs. I'll run along." I walked over to her, took her by the shoulders, and lifted her out of the way. Her forehead was near, so I kissed it before I put her down. "Good night," I said. She didn't answer. She was crying, so I guess she couldn't. Awful scared. I

was glad about that because I knew it wasn't herself she was scared for.

I woke up the next morning and thought I was still asleep, and in the middle of a foul dream. I was cold—stone-cold, wet-cold. I felt as slimy as an eel in a barrel of oil. I opened my eyes and tried to shake the feeling off. It wouldn't shake. My last night's dinner roiled inside me as I realized that the sliminess was there, all right—my two sheets were coated with it. I could feel the wet, thick mass of it all over me. I could strip it off one arm with the other hand, and throw it —*sclup*—onto the floor.

But I couldn't see it.

I ran, gasping and retching, into the bathroom. My feet seemed to slip on the stuff, and I had trouble turning the doorknob with my slimy fingers. I climbed under the hottest shower I had ever taken, soaped, rinsed, soaped again, rinsed again. And I got out of the tub feeling cold and clammy and slimy as ever. I rubbed down with one clean, dry towel after another, until my skin was scarlet and tingling—but it tingled under the coating of invisible slime.

I tried to put some clothes on, but I couldn't stand the pressure of them; they seemed to drive the thick mass of it into my pores. I threw them off, leaped into bed, and pulled the covers over me, and with a yelp I leaped out again. It was bad enough to have it, but I couldn't bear to wallow in it. The phone rang. Iola.

"Gus!" she said. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, Miss Iola."

"Gus, I'm terribly worried about you. Has he . . it . done anything to you?"

I hesitated. It wouldn't do any good to lie. "Yeah, he's been skylarking around."

"Gus, what has he done?"

"Nothin' worth talking about."

"Oh, you won't tell me. It must be something really terrible!"

"Why so?"

"Because I . . . I . . . well, I— Gus, aren't you going to say it first? Why it is that he would treat you worse than any other man I've ever known?"

I slowly began to get what she was driving at. "Miss Iola—you don't lo . . . care for me or something, huh?"

"Darling!"

I said, "Holy smoke!"

I did some thinking after I hung up. I couldn't let this thing get me down—not now, not after hearing news like that. I clamped my jaw and got out some clean underwear and socks. I was remembering something my pop told me after my first street fight. "If you git hurt, me bye, doan't let th' other feller know it. If he thinks he can't hurt ye, ye've got 'im licked."

So I dressed. With my clothes I clasped the chill ooze to me, and when I walked out the door the slime dripped from the creases of my flesh as I moved. I stepped out onto the street with some misgivings, but no one noticed me particularly. It was invisible, thank the Powers.

And when I woke the next day the sliminess was gone.

I went to Henry Gade's place and borrowed a pen and paper. I had told him what I'd heard from Iola about her trouble, but nothing else. He had cut me short; he'd heard it all before.

"Who are you writing to?" he asked over his pipe, watching me scratching laboriously away at the letter.

"I'm doin' what anyone should do when he's in trouble—consulting an expert," I said, and kept on writing. After a while he came around and peered over my shoulder. Psychologists got no manners.

"'Miss Beatrice Dix, *The Daily Mail*,'" he read aloud, and roared with laughter. "So you've got trouble along those lines, too, have you? Ha? Beatrice Dix—Advice to the Lovelorn!"

"You tell your little mouth to stop makin' those noises or it'll get poked,"

I growled. He went on reading what I had written:

"Dear Miss Dix:

"I got a problem about a girl I am very serious with. This girl has a fellow who likes her, but she don't like him none at all. He keeps on bothering her and ordering her to keep away from other men, but he never comes to see her or gives her anything or takes her out and on top of that he keeps on doing things to any other man that is interested in her and especially to me because—"

"Good heavens, Gus, couldn't you put a full stop in there somewhere?"

—"because I am at present her big moment. The things he does are not the kind of things you can get the law on him for. What I want to know is what right has this fellow to be so jealous when the girl has no use for him and what can we do to get rid of him."

"Either you're an extremely exacting student of literary styling," said Henry, "or you actually are the kind of person who writes in to Beatrice Dix's column. I've always wondered what one of those nitwits looked like," he added thoughtfully, standing off and regarding me as if I were a museum piece. "Tell me—who's the cutter-inner in your little romance?"

"A ghost."

"A ghost? Iola's jealous ghost? Gus, Gus, you improve by the hour. And do you really think you can exorcise him with the aid of a heart-throb column?"

"He don't need no exercise."

"Get out of here, Gus, you're killing me."

"I will, before I do," I said. "Thanks for the paper and ink."

The following day Iola's haunt created something new and different for me. But I couldn't brave this one out. I stayed home all day after phoning the boss that I was very, very ill. Exactly what was done I can't print in a family magazine.

The answer to my letter came far sooner than I had hoped for. I hadn't asked for a personal reply, and so it was printed, with my letter, as follows:

G. S.:

You are up against a very difficult problem, if we understand the situation correctly. We have run up against such cases before. The young man who is persecuting the two of you will continue to do so just as long as he finds the girl attractive to his peculiar type of mind. And what can you do about it? Any one of several things.

You can ignore him completely. You can take the girl out or go to see her as often as you and she find pleasant, and do it without regard for the jealous one's feelings or actions.

Or you can, together or singly, get the man to talk the whole thing out with you. Perhaps there is some misunderstanding on his part, or perhaps you can appeal to his better nature.

Or you might try to find someone else who would interest him. It is just possible that among your friends there is one who could charm him away from your heart's desire, and thus leave you two alone.

But you must be patient. Please, for your own sakes, do not do anything rash—you will regret it all your lives. Some solution to your problem should arise soon—such a situation cannot go on forever. The best of luck to you both in this great trial.

I read it over half a dozen times. I figured this Dix woman was a real expert at this racket, and she ought to know what to do. But how about it? "Ignore him completely." How can you be married to a woman when you know you're liable to turn slimy at a moment's notice? "Appeal to his better nature—talk it out with him." Catch him first. "Find someone else who would interest him." Catch a lady ghost, huh? And persuade her to vamp him.

I took the paper over to Henry Gade. He's better at thinking things out than I am. On some things I guess I'm kind of dumb.

He waved the paper aside as I came in. "I've seen it," he said. "I was looking for it. Well, did it help?"

I said no. "But I'll find some way out, if I hafta—"

"Ah-ah!" said Henry over a raised forefinger. "Remember what Beatrice said—don't do anything rash!"

"Well, what do you think about what she said?"

"I think it's a lovely piece of say-nothing, except that she hit the nail on the head when she said that the guy will keep right on bothering you lovebirds just as long as he finds the girl attractive. I can't get over it!" he exploded, and put his head on one side, watching me. "Good old misogynous Gus, in love after all these years!"

"Maybe it hits harder for that," I said, and he stopped his ape-grinning and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I guess it does. You do reach i and get the truth at times, old man."

The letter from Iola was waiting for me when I got back home.

DEAREST GUS:

This is a rotten thing for me to do, but I've got to do it. I have a suspicion of what you've been going through so bravely; *he* talked to me last night and told me some of the things he's done to you. It's all your fault; I can't torture you like this any longer, because I love you.

So you mustn't write, Gus darling, and you mustn't phone, and above all you must never, never see me again. It's the only way out for both of us, and if it's a painful and a cruel way, then that's the breaks. Forgive me if you can—if you can't it doesn't matter.

But, beloved—*don't* try to get in touch with me. I have bought a little revolver, and if you do that I'll kill myself. That's not idle talk, Gus. I'm not afraid to do it. I've lived through enough pain.

Sweet, sweet sweetheart, how my heart bleeds for you!

I read it over once and tried to read it again because, somehow, I couldn't see so well. Then I dove for the phone, and thought about the revolver, and turned my back on it. Oh, she'd do it—I knew her.

Then I went out.

Henry found me. Maybe it was three weeks later, maybe four. I didn't know because I didn't give a damn. I was sitting on a bench with a couple of other gentlemen. I had learned the difference between rich gentlemen and real gentlemen. Rich gentlemen carry a great weight of responsibility in property management, tradition, the maintenance of social position, and such trash. And with all that, they futilely attempt to be idle. But real gentlemen carry nothing; no responsibility nor customs nor morals nor possessions. They sit in the sun because the sun is theirs, and they sleep in the dark provided for them. These things are free and irrevocably theirs, for they may not be taken away, and they require no effort to maintain. So when he found me I was a gentleman.

"Gus!"

"Go away. You're Henry. I remember you. Go away, Henry."

"Gus! Get up out of that! You're drunk! Come home with me, Gus."

One of the other gentlemen backslid to the extent of taking some of Henry's money for helping Henry get me home. Once there, I slept the clock around.

Henry woke me, sponging my face with warm water. "Lost thirty pounds or more," he was muttering. "Filthy rags—ten-day beard—"

"All right, Henry, I'm awake."

"You're not awake," snorted Henry. "You're half dead inside. And I used to think you were a man—one of the three real men I ever met!"

"You know what happened to me," I said, as if that excused and explained everything.

"Yes, I know what happened to you," he roared. "You lost your cotton-headed filly. And did you stand up and take it? No! You lay down and let yourself get kicked like the jelly-bellied no-good you are!"

"But she wouldn't—"

"I know, I know. She refused to see you any more. That's got nothing to do with it. You're wound up with her—finished. And you tried to run away. You tried to escape into filth and rotgut liquor. Don't you realize that you do nothing that way but burn up what's clean in you and leave all that's rotten, with the original wound festering in the middle of it?"

I turned my face to the wall, but I

couldn't stop his voice. "Get up and bathe and shave and eat a decent meal! Try to act like a human being until you can give as good an imitation as you used to. You even had me fooled into thinking you were a higher animal! Get up, you slug!"

"No," I said thickly.

Suddenly he was on his knees by the bed, an arm across my shoulders. "Stop your blubbering," he said gently. "Stop it, now. The man's broken! Gus—you're a grown man now." He sat back on his haunches, frowning and breathing too deeply. Suddenly he rolled me over on my back, began slapping my face with his right hand, back and front, back and front, over and over and over in sharp, hard, stinging blows.

"Stop it! Stop it, Henry!" I screamed, trying feebly to ward him off, to turn my head away. He held my hands down with his left hand, while he cuffed away with his right.

And then something snapped inside me and I reared up off the bed and sent a whistling roundhouse at him. He ducked under it and jarred me with a left to the temple. And then we went to work. I was big and emaciated, and he was little and inspired. It was quite a show. It ended with him stretched out on the carpet and me hunched on the edge of the bed, stanching a bleeding nose with a corner of the sheet and looking at the unconscious figure of my one real friend. I felt sick and ashamed. I got up wearily and brought a cloth from the bathroom and patted cold water over his head and neck.

"Thanks, Gus," he grinned weakly.

"Why'd you get me so riled up? Why'd you make me hit you?"

"Applied psychology," he said, getting up groggily. I helped him. "I had to get you mad. You were lying down on the job of living like so much bird-droppings."

I felt my swollen nose. "And I thought psychology was a brain specialty," I said.

"It is," said Henry, "but some folks carry their brains pretty deep. Now listen, pal. You and I are going to straighten old Gus out for good. You've got something deep down inside that hurts—right?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Ah—that's where you're wrong. We're going to talk about it. We're not going to talk about anything else. We're going to turn that knife in that wound until it hurts so much you won't feel it any more. You're going to get purged, brother. And we'll start right now. What did you see in that white-headed babe, anyway?"

"She's . . . she's . . . I just can't get along without her."

"You got slushy. I think your taste is lousy." Henry's eyes were narrowed and he teetered on the balls of his feet. He knew when he was treading on thin ice, but he was going to go through with this. "What do you see in an anaemic-looking wench like that? Give me nice, firm, rosy girls with some blood in their veins. *Heh!* Her, with her white hair and white skin and two great big black holes for eyes! She looks like a ghost! She isn't worth—"

I roared and charged. He stepped nimbly out of the way. I charged right past him and into the bathroom. "Where's your razor?" I shouted. "Where's the soap? Have you got any clothes around here that will fit anything but a spindle-shanked, gabby-mouthed brainworker with stenographer's spread?" And I dove into the shower.

When I came out of the bathroom and started climbing into some clothes, he demanded an explanation. "What did I say? What did I do?" He was hopping exultantly from one foot to the other, looking at me as if I were something he had invented.

"You said it a long while back," I said. "So did Beatrice Dix. Something about, 'He'll annoy you just as long as he finds the girl attractive.'" I laced the second shoe, demanded some

money, and pounded out before I had the sentence well finished.

I rang somebody else's bell at the apartment house and when the buzzer burped at me I headed for the stairs. I rang Iola's bell and waited breathlessly. The knob turned and I crowded right in. She was drawing a negligee about her. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Gus!" She drew back, turned and ran to a lamp table. "Oh, you *fool!* Why do you have to make it harder for us?" She moved so fast I couldn't stop her. She had the gun in her hand before I realized where she had hidden it.

"Hold on, you little dope!" I roared. This was such a far cry from "Miss Iola" that she almost dropped the gun. "That may be a way out, but you're not going out alone. We're going together!"

"Gus—"

"And doing it together we're not doing it that way! Give me that thing!" I strode across the room, lifted it out of her hand. I opened the magazine, took the barrel in one hand and the butt in the other and twisted them apart, throwing the pieces at her feet. "Now get in there and get dressed. We've got things to do!" She hesitated, and I pushed her roughly toward the bedroom. "One of us is going to dress you," I said somberly. "Move, now, or I'll kick your curves from here to Scranton, Pennsylvania!"

She squeaked and moved. I tramped up and down the living room, gleefully kicking the broken gun on every trip. She was ready in about four minutes; she came out frightened and puzzled and radiant. I took her wrist and dragged her out of the apartment. As soon as we passed under the garlic on the door, my skin began to tingle, then to itch, and suddenly I felt that I was a mass of open, festering sores. And on top of this came the slime again. I gritted my teeth and sluiced down my pain with sheer exultation.

We piled into a taxi and I gave an address. When Iola asked questions I laughed happily. We pulled up at a curb and I paid off the driver. "Go on in there," I said.

"A beauty parlor! But what—"

I pushed her in. A white-uniformed beautician came forward timidly. I took a strand of Iola's white hair and tossed it. "Dye this," I said. "Dye it black!"

"Gus!" gasped Iola. "You're mad! I don't *want* to be a brunette! I haven't the coloring for—"

"Coloring? You know what kind of coloring you have, with those big black holes of eyes and that white skin and hair? *You look like a ghost!* Don't you see? That's why he hounded you! That's why he loved you and was jealous of you! You look like a *ghost!*"

Her eyes got very bright. She looked in a mirror and said, "Gus—you remember that summer I told you about, when he first spoke to me? I was wearing a long white dress—white shoes—"

"Get in there and be a brunette," I growled. The operator took her away.

I settled down into a big chair to wait. I was suffering a thousand different agonies, a hundred different kinds of torments. Pains and horrid creeping sensations flickered over my body the way colors shift on a color-organ. I sat there taking it, and taking it, and then I heard the operator's voice from the back of the studio. "There you are, ma'am. All done. Look in there—how do you like it?" And then there was Iola's voice in a long, pensive "Hm-m-m!"

And deep within me I almost heard a sound like a snort of disgust, and then there was a feeling like an infinite lightening of pressure. And then my body was fresh and whole again, and the ghostly pains were gone.

Iola came out and flung her arms around my neck. As a brunette she was stunning.

Henry Gadé was our best man.

THE END.

The Hounds Of Kalimar

by P. Schuyler Miller

It was Kalimar's land before the men came—as the world had been before Man came. But here Kalimar and the things he ruled trapped men, and tested them against the old powers—

Illustrated by Isi

I will always remember Kalimar as we first saw him, lolling on his oaken throne with his hounds at his knees.

The massive doors had swung shut behind us, and we stood in the half light of the great hall with the two ugly little servants at our elbows. Gradually our eyes adjusted to the gloom, and we saw him. A monocle glittered in the socket of one sunken eye. The scarlet ribbon of some Balkan order cut across his snowy shirt front. His bandy legs were tucked up under him, and his hairy face was drawn down between his massive shoulders. He watched us for a minute or two, then bent and whispered in the ear of the huge beast at his side. It growled low in its throat and got stiffly to its feet—as big as a Shetland pony it looked there—and with its mate behind it came stalking down the length of the hall toward us.

But my story doesn't begin there.

It begins, I should say, as we squatted beside Jim Henry's little "Indian" campfire, with our trout sizzling in the pan. Jim makes a lot of the difference between the white man's huge bonfire, so hot that he can't get near enough to cook, and the small fire of the real woodsman. I like to let him josh me about things like that, because it isn't often that he shows his Indian blood.

We had come into the valley by pure accident, following the kind of urge that drove Jim's remote ancestors across the ice of Bering Strait to the *terra incognita* of the Alaskan shore, and my own viking forebears across the gray wastes of the North Atlantic to that Vinland which the geographers promptly forgot. We knew that there were still large areas of privately owned land in the western Adirondacks, back from the trails and the logging roads, but we had never explored this particular section before. Consequently, when we came over the ridge into virgin timber it was a surprise, and a welcome one.

The place was a boxed-in valley, not more than two miles long, with the mountains going up all around it. As we

found later, the ridges came down to sheer cliffs at its mouth, which was choked by one of those Adirondack bogs which are really grown-up lakes. That may be what kept the lumber companies out.

The woods were tinder-dry, and we had set out the week before in the hope of finding new fishing waters before the State closed them. This looked like what we were after. We fished the first stream we came to, and soon had the best kind of evidence that no one else had been near the place in years, if ever. I made camp while Jim cooked, and it must have been about that time that I noticed the squirrel.

Of course, there isn't a great deal of bird life stirring, even in the wilderness, late in the day. From the mountain we had heard whitethroats whistling below us, and seen chickadees bouncing from treetop to treetop, and juncos flitting through the tangled mass of junipers and dwarf spruce on the ridge. Then, as we worked our way down into the valley, things changed. The small bird notes were hushed, though I could have sworn that I saw tiny forms slipping through the branches above us. Still, there are days when for some reason not a bird will so much as peep, and I thought nothing of it. We caught our fish, and I had just unrolled our sleeping bags when I saw the squirrel.

It was a red squirrel, and it was plastered against the trunk of one of the big spruces a good fifty feet above us. It was watching us. That was what struck me first. Usually they are jittery little creatures, their tails jerking nervously, moving in jumps and starts and breaking into a rattle of abuse when they know they have been discovered.

This one was like a rusty lichen clinging to the bark. Its tail was curved against the tree trunk and its body was as flat as it could make it. It clung there, absolutely motionless, staring at us. I missed the sizzle of the frying pan and saw that Jim had spied it too. I took a step forward, and in a flash it was gone.

Instantly Jim was on his feet. His "Indian" look had come over his face like a mask. Still holding the pan, he took a quick step to one side, his finger raised to signal me. I followed. The squirrel was making off through the trees at top speed, in a beeline across the forest floor. It whisked into a deadfall and disappeared.

Jim set the frying pan down on a rock beside the fire. "It was a messenger," he said quietly. "I don't like that."

We had an hour or two of daylight left, but our camp site was a good one and we stayed there. We sat with our backs against a huge fallen hemlock, a good four feet through the trunk. I had my pipe and Jim, who doesn't smoke, was repairing the rim of his pack basket. His fingers were busy with the splints, but his eyes were on the forest, and pretty soon I found myself watching too.

His face gave no sign, but I knew he had seen something. I followed the direction of his gaze, and began methodically to study the face of the forest. Finally I saw it: a blue jay, its crested head cocked a little, one black eye fixed on us. It might have been carved out of painted wood, so still it was. A flick of motion caught the corner of my eye, and I saw a fox crouching in the shadows. And then I began to see them all.

A lump near the top of a small balsam was a porcupine. A dead leaf caught in a fork was another squirrel. Little round shadows among the higher branches were chickadees and kinglets. The sinuous shadow of a hemlock root on the stream bank became a weasel. And their eyes were on us.

The hair along my backbone began to prickle. We sat there without speaking, our backs to the log, watching them and they stared back at us. I felt, oddly, that they were laying siege to us—that if we should move or try to leave they would somehow prevent it.

Jim was listening. His fingers had stopped working on the basket and were curled around the hilt of his hunting

knife. My pipe had gone out, and I tapped it on my heel and dropped it into my coat pocket. The absurdity of the situation struck me: two grown men held at bay by a few animals. I reached for a stone and Jim's hand caught my arm.

"That's no good now," he said. "They're coming."

They came up the game trail along the creek: the two great hounds on leashes of plaited leather and the two little men, their rifles in the crook of their arms. Their heads were small and peaked—monkeylike—with flat brows and receding chins. They were covered with a kind of grizzled brown fur that grew long on their arms and legs and a little shorter on their dark faces. They had on hunting coats and a kind of leather kilt, and they were barefooted.

The hounds were huge. I have seen, somewhere, an account of a lost breed—Russian, I think they were—like Irish staghounds, only much bigger, bred to run down and kill big game. These hounds of Kalimar were like that.

The taller of the two men spoke. He came barely to my shoulder, and I'm not especially tall. His accent was strange: I couldn't place it at all. He seemed to stumble over the syllables, as though his tongue were stiff.

"You will come to the Mas-ter."

His rifle hung carelessly at his side, but his hairy finger was on the trigger and the barrel was pointed straight at my belly. His companion had a similar bead on Jim. And the two dogs stood with lowered heads, black lips curled back over their gleaming fangs, their tails down, straining against the leashes. I looked sidewise at Jim. His face had that veiled look that means he has withdrawn into his thoughts. The knife that had been in his hand a moment before was gone. He stepped forward, and I followed him.

The trail we followed wound down the stream bed for a little distance, then swung off to the northwest, angling down the side of the mountain toward the head of the valley. It may have been a game trail, or it may have been man-made. It was old enough, at any rate, for all traces of blazes to have disappeared.

The smaller of the two monkey men went ahead. We came next, Jim leading, with the two hounds at our heels. The men had our packs, but they had not touched the things we were carrying. I wondered what had happened to Jim's knife.

We went without speaking. The sight of Jim's impassive back swinging along in front of me kept my own mouth closed. I had an odd feeling that his Indin's mind was racing ahead of us, spying the way, planning what we must do.

The beasts came with us. Twice I glimpsed the fox, slipping like a wraith through the underbrush off to our left, and once I saw a big buck standing like a statue in the deepening shadows, watching us pass. A squirrel went ahead of us in the trail, lolloping along a few yards ahead of our guide, and I thought of Jim's quiet comment: a "messenger." Was it really the one we had seen first? Had it gone to this "Master" and warned him of our intrusion in his hidden valley?

The cliffs came down in a sheer wall that closed the valley in on both sides, and the way was blocked by masses of fallen rock like great stone houses, grown over with moss and small trees. Deep down in the crevices between them I could hear water gurgling. There were cavelike holes that you could have driven a truck into. The trail wound over and around them, and down the other side of the pass into the upper valley.

My eyes were on my feet, for the going wasn't easy, but I heard one of the great hounds growl and looked up. At the same moment our guide stopped.

The panther lay in a patch of dying sunlight on a great, bare rock beside the path. She was white—an albino. The torn body of a doe was under her great paw.

The man behind us called to his companion in a strange clucking language. I thought it might be like Bushman, or some similar African tongue. The other turned, his monkey face contorted, and chattered an impatient reply. I thought they were worried. And then he spoke to the panther.

He began in a low, purring voice, quite unlike the one he had used before, and the great cat raised her head from her prey and listened. His voice hardened; there was a threat in it, and I heard the leather of the hounds' leashes creaking as they strained against them. I eased up beside Jim, and his strong fingers gripped my wrist warningly. His eyes had the eagle look in them, and he was smiling.

The monkey man was losing his temper. The pur had gone out of his strange speech; I expected to see him jump up and down. All the while the panther lay staring at him with silent insolence, licking her chops with a pink tongue and flexing her great curved claws. Her yellow eyes appraised us passionlessly, one by one, and they seemed to pause a moment as they studied Jim. They passed on to the hounds, and I saw her ears twitch back. Then, like a passing shadow, she was gone among the rocks.

I looked at Jim. His eyes were studying the place, memorizing it.

The upper valley opened out beyond the pass. It was nearly filled by a little lake, dark and shadowed by the cliffs. The outlet wandered through a small beaver meadow, dropped over a little waterfall, and vanished among the rocks at our feet.

The lodge stood on a kind of shelf at the head of the lake. It was built of logs, and even at that distance we could see that they were huge. Its eaves hung low, and there were no windows that I could see, nor any smoke from the massive stone chimney at the far end. There were sheds of some kind behind it in the trees, and beside a stone jetty floated an amphibian plane, its silver wings mirrored in the still, dark water.

There were no signs of life around the place as we came up to it. The hounds had been loosed and raced silently on ahead. I studied the building as we approached. It was like very old Central European hunting lodges I have seen, massive and low-roofed, but the logs were not much weathered and the roof of cedar shakes had not had time to darken. Five years it might have been there—not more.

The doors were made of adzed planks a good three feet wide, fastened with black old ironwork that was certainly much more than five years old. At a command from the little men we set our packs down on the ground and lined up in front of a gun while one of them pattered off around the corner of the house out of sight. Presently the doors swung silently open and we stepped into the gloom of a great, raftered hall that ran the whole length of the building. There was no light in the place except what came through two narrow loopholes cut in the logs, high up on either side of the great chimney, and as the doors closed behind us we stood for a moment, blind.

Our vision cleared, and we saw Kalimar.

A shaft of the fading sunlight cut through the gloom and picked out the scarlet ribbon across his barrel chest. The reflected light from his stiff shirt front lit up his ugly face and glinted on the monocle in his sunken eye. The two hounds were at his side, and he bent and whispered to one of them. It came stalking toward us down the length of the hall, its savage head lowered, and its mate got to its feet and followed. I heard Jim draw in his breath with a sudden hiss. Like a flash he spun, seizing the nearest of the little men by the arm and heaving. The man went over his head with the squall of a frightened cat and came down sprawling at the dog's feet. It started back and slashed viciously at him, its fangs snapping at his throat, when the man on the throne

snarled a command. It cringed back, its tail hugging its legs.

Kalimar was on his feet now. He had a kilt like the monkey men, a silken sash and a dress coat. His legs were short for his girth, his shoulders hunched. He straightened them self-consciously, with something of an effort, as he came toward us.

"You are very bold for trespassers," he said. His little coffee-colored eyes were on Jim's face. "I, Kalimar, am master in this valley. My servants obey my commands without question. I do not like intruders."

His accent was beyond me. The English was perfect, but the words were somehow thickened—a little like the monkey men. Yet for all his hairiness he lacked their bestial look. He might have been anything.

"We had no intention of trespassing," Jim told him quietly. "The valley is not posted. We had no idea that we were on private land until we saw your—watchers."

Kalimar's wide nostrils contracted, and his thick fingers tightened on the scruff of the hound's neck. "So? What do you know of my watchers?"

"My people made these mountains their hunting ground long before—this—was here." Jim's gesture took in the lodge, the oaken throne, and Kalimar himself. "We were friends to the watchers of the woods, but he never named them servants. Perhaps their ways have changed."

"Perhaps!" The man's mouth was a thin dark line across his hairy face. "You shall see what servants Kalimar commands!"

The little monkey men sprang to the doors at his command and pushed them slowly back. Twilight flooded into the hall, the last glow of the darkening heavens, brightening the place a little. And one by one the servants of Kalimar filed into the lodge and took their places around his throne.

The smaller ones came first, hopping and running—squirrels, great snowshoe hares, raccoons—a dozen others. The larger followed them—a buck walking warily with lowered head, the rolling shadow of a black bear, the lean phantom that I knew was a wolf. Last of them all, insolent and alone, the wan light gleaming with ghostly phosphorescence on her pale fur, strode the she-panther, to lie down at one side of the rest, across from the hounds. Her cat's eyes glowed green in the half light, and their gaze was fixed on Jim's dark face.

Kalimar leaned forward, one elbow on his crooked knee. "You are proud of your ancestry, you—men!" he spat. "Ongwe Oweh—the only true men! Hodinosauni — people of the Long House! Where are your houses now, true man? What forests are your hunting grounds? Whose servants are you—or do you call the white apes without hair your brothers? Ptah! We old ones laugh at you!"

In answer, from that silent assemblage, came a rustle of shifting feet, a mocking whisper that made my skin crawl. Only the great white panther lay quiet before the throne, her slitted eyes appraising us.

Jim's voice came tauntingly through the gloom. "Send your servants to light a fire on the hearth, Kalimar. It is dark here. We men like to see the faces of the beasts who come to speak with us."

The monocle glinted. "You think I am afraid of fire? We need no fire, we old ones, man of the Long House. The eyes of the forest people see no darkness."

"We men are weak," Jim taunted. His elbow nudged me; I found the matches in my pocket and gave them to him. "We have no fur to warm us. Our bellies are too weak to eat raw flesh. Our eyes are sick from staring at the sun. We need fire; it is *our* servant, Kalimar."

The sputter of the match made me jump, and as the yellow flame licked up I saw the beasts flinch back, and that evil grin come over Kalimar's black face.

Only the panther never moved, and the two hounds that sat opposite her, their eyes on our throats.

There was wood in the fireplace; apparently Kalimar was not always so saving of fire. Jim knelt and kindled some shavings. The licking flames filled the long hall with their warm light and sent grotesque shadows capering about the oaken throne and the strange court that crowded about it. There was a shiver of motion, the smaller creatures withdrawing into the shadows, even the gaunt gray muzzle of the wolf twitching

uneasily. Kalimar bent and whispered to them, a few quick words, and they were quiet. He got up and came down the hall toward us, the animals following close behind him.

"You are daring, red man," he said. "More daring, I think, than your white brother. More daring than a man should be, who speaks to Kalimar!" His voice hardened. I could smell a heavy, animal odor that seemed to come from him and from the ranked beasts behind him. "Listen—we are of the old race, these two and I. The first race, that lived before your hairless breed came out of the jungles. Your kind has hunted us down, through all the ages, but there are a few of the old blood left and there will be more. Your blood is thin, naked man. We beasts will lick it up!"

Jim's voice was grave as he replied: "I have no quarrel with you, Kalimar, nor has my people. In the forest life is a struggle in which the strongest wins. Your kind and ours struggled for food and shelter when the Great Ice came, and it was we who were strong. That time is past; there need be no more war between us."

The man was past all reasoning. Hatred burned red in his little eyes, and the stench of hate was heavy in the air. The beasts were stirring uneasily at the reek of it. "Strong!" he shouted. "Your strength is treachery, naked man! Where a beast hunts fairly you set a snare. Where a beast fights with claw and fang you pick up sticks and stones. Strip you naked—take away your knives and guns—and there is not a beast in the forest that cannot take the food from under your fumbling fingers and bring you down in fair fight!"

He had drawn himself up on his crooked legs until I thought he would fall over backward. One of his shirt studs had popped out, and the bushy black hair showed through the gap. This ape—playing the man! I laughed.

I thought he would attack me. The dogs stiffened in their tracks, and the little servants took a step forward, their rifles ready. He turned his burning little eyes on me.

"Yes-s-s," he hissed. "You are here, too. The white brother of the savage. The proud Caucasian. The master of the world. And you find me funny!" His ugly face thrust so close that I could see the muddy whites of his evil little eyes. "You laugh at what I say." The monocle fell and dangled at the end of its ribbon, and his voice sank to a venomous hiss. "Can you fish with the otter? Can you hunt with the wolf? Can you strike with the eagle?"

Jim's calm voice interrupted him. "We can."

It stopped him cold. There was froth on his thin black lips. His coat had bunched up around his hairy ears. Abruptly he turned and shuffled back to his oaken chair; the animals stepping aside to let him through. He squatted there, his legs dangling, glaring at us. The hounds still held us where we were, before the fire.

"You have boasted," he snarled. "Now prove your boast!"

He gave a mewing cry, and a lithe, shadowy shape slipped out of the press and reared itself against his knee. He growled deep in his throat and the great timber wolf rose stiff-legged at his feet. He gave a keening shriek and two vast, spreading wings unfolded in the shadows where an eagle perched on the carved back of the throne. Jim's face was blank.

"The forest asks no odds, and gives none," Kalimar sneered. "You have made a boast; now prove it, against these three—naked, and without arms. If you are better fishermen than the otter—if you can stalk your prey more craftily than the wolf—if you can strike more swiftly than the eagle—then we will talk again. But there is only one failure which the forest admits—death!" He motioned to the monkey men. "Strip them!"

There was a moon, and it was surprisingly light outside, even under the

spruces. The rocky stubble was hard on my unaccustomed feet, but Jim gave no sign that he felt it, and I did my best to keep countenance.

Kalimar stood in the door of his hall, a blacker shadow against the inner blackness. "You will have until sunrise," he said. "You will return here—or my hounds will bring you. My watchers will tell me if you try to leave the valley, and my servants will be ready for you. Bring back your kill, and I will judge it!"

There was a tiny splash at our feet as the otter slipped into the quiet waters of the lake. A shadow in the shadows—and the wolf was gone. The brush of great wings and the eagle swung off through the moonlight. Jim touched my arm.

"Come on," he said. "We have work to do."

I stumbled after him as best I could down the rocky trail toward the lower valley. At the edge of the beaver meadow, where there was a grove of basswoods, we stopped and with a jagged stone Jim ripped off sections of the smooth bark and made me a pair of crude sandals, lashing them on with cord made of the twisted inner bark. I clattered when I walked, like a Dutch schoolgirl, but at least I could make some progress.

Jim was studying the beaver flow. It was small but deep, and there would be big trout in it The outlet of the lake dropped down into it over a series of granite ledges, and the beavers had built their dam across a split in a basalt dike that cut through the lighter-colored stone. As I looked something broke water and the otter climbed out on the far bank, a fish in its mouth. There were already three like it on the grass. We were competing with nature's most expert fisherman.

Jim sensed my despair. "We're men," he said. "Remember? All we have is brains—and treachery. Let's use them."

The beaver dam was a big one, wedged into the crack in the dike. It would take dynamite to move it. Jim slipped into the water and worked his way down along its inner face. As his dark head popped up beside me, the wolf gave tongue somewhere beyond the pass, in the lower valley. It had found its quarry.

"We're lucky," Jim told me. "The muskrats have riddled the dam. The beavers drove a log into the biggest hole, but I think we can get it out. With this head of water the pond should go down fast."

It was easy to say. The beavers had left gnawed-off stubs of branches on the log, and woven them into the structure of the dam. Jim worked at it from the pond side, under water, while I tore at the downstream face, trying to expose the other end of the log. When I did reach it, the thing wouldn't stir. It had been put there to stay!

Jim had managed to get one crotch clear on his side, and by using a stout pole as a lever he managed to loosen the log. When it finally pulled out, the burst of water through the hole nearly bowled me over. We plugged away in the cold water, tearing at the sides of the hole, trying to enlarge it. Then, across the pool, came the spat of a beaver's tail. Another answered it. Climbing up on the dam I saw the V of ripples streaming back from their swimming heads. Ordinarily they were wary of men, but there was something different in the air of this secret valley.

"Get a club," Jim muttered. "Kalimar may have given them their orders."

The foremost beaver was a big old male, and it made straight for Jim, who stood waist-deep in the pool near the end of the dam. Its long yellow incisors gleamed in the moonlight as it reared out of the water, its webbed forepaws trying to push him under. Then his club crashed down on its flat skull and it went limp.

"He wants killing," Jim said. "Here's our beginning."

There were five beaver dead on the bank before they gave up. It might take

hours for the pond to drain. "You stay here," Jim told me, "in case they come back. I'm going to put a weir across the inlet so the fish can't escape upstream."

While he was gone the otter swam down to investigate. Its bewhiskered face bobbed up out of the water at my feet. It stared at me for a moment, then disappeared. There was a sudden flurry, and a big fish plunged through the hole in the dam and splashed off downstream. The furry devil was driving them out of the pool!

Fish head up current when they are scared, and would naturally keep clear of the dam, but the otter was driving

them through like sheep. I slid down into the brook bed, and when the next big trout came flapping through the hole I pounced on him. I had eight big ones strung on a hemlock bough before the otter discovered what I was doing.

Jim laughed when he saw them. "Men's tricks," he observed. "Good work. But we have a bigger job ahead. What's happened to that wolf?"

As if in answer its long-drawn howl echoed among the cliffs again, much closer than before. Jim nodded. "Kalimar has outguessed himself this time," he said. "I thought he might. That wolf will make its kill on his very doorstep—if it gets there."

He had found a vein of quartzite in the granite. There was no time to chip elaborate weapons, but Jim soon made a blunt-based, knifelike tool with a wicked edge. With it we managed to hack down two hardwood saplings and scrape them to long, sharp points. They made respectable spears.

Jim had picked his spot. I believe that he had memorized every foot of the trail we had come over. The path dropped down between two huge flat-topped rocks, not more than four feet apart, covered with low hemlocks. I noted with satisfaction that the wind was up valley, toward us.

We crouched in the shelter of the hemlocks, one on either side of the trail. We had smeared our bodies with mud to hide the gleam of our naked skins. Jim was not much darker than I am, for all his Indian blood. The Iroquois were not a dark people.

The buck was a big one and running hard. It came over a rock a hundred feet away in one great leap, vanished behind a boulder, and then streaked straight between the two rocks. Like a pouncing lynx Jim was astride it, gripping its magnificent antlers with one fist and stabbing at its throat with his knife. It stumbled under his weight and threw him, came slowly to its feet and stood backed against the rock, its antlers lowered warningly.

As the buck lunged, the wolf appeared in the gap between the rocks. My eyes were on Jim and it took me unawares. As the buck came at him he had seized its antlers in both hands and twisted. It fell heavily and he was on it in a flash, dodging past its flailing hoofs and burying his stone knife deep in its jugular.

As the wolf paused I rolled off the rock and dropped behind it in the narrow alley between the rocks. It was a crazy move, but I was not doing much of the thinking which is supposed to distinguish men from animals. And I had my spear.

It wheeled on me with a snarl and sprang. Its leap carried it under my point, but the stout shaft of the spear warded it off and it crashed against the rock. I stumbled back and stabbed at it frantically, but it sprang again, over the spear, straight at my throat. I swung up the heavy sapling like a quarterstaff and the butt caught the wolf on the side of the head, beating it aside as I went over backward. It gathered its legs under it, its eyes blazing at me in the darkness, then before it could attack again I had pinned it to the ground.

The spear had gone through a fold of its skin, and it was a matter of seconds before it would tear loose. Gritting my teeth I leaped on it with both feet, feeling the ribs crunch under my weight. Then before the crippled beast could rise I had snatched the spear back and driven it with all my strength through its heart.

The dead buck Jim left lying beside the trail where it had fallen. Dragging the wolf's carcass out into the open, he skinned it quickly and crudely with his quartz knife, tearing away the skin in a bloody bundle topped by the beast's grinning mask. The flayed body he left left beside the buck.

The pool was draining fast. Already the beaver houses were out of water, and the bed of the original brook was showing down the middle of the pond. Jim

hacked off lighter hardwood forks and sharpened the ends. They made effective tridents.

Beginning at the dam, we waded slowly upstream, thigh-deep in the muddy waters. Even in the bright moonlight it was hard to see the fish, but Jim's trident never missed. I had speared suckers myself as a boy, and I did not do too badly.

The otter was ahead of us in the deeper water, running wild among the frantic fish. The grating of plaited twigs which Jim had placed across the inlet kept the fish from escaping upstream into the lake, and we blocked the way downstream. The result was carnage.

Suddenly Jim flung himself headlong into the water. As he struggled to his feet I saw that he had pinned the otter down with his trident and held it now by the tail and the scruff of its thick neck, stretched out to keep it from using its claws. At his direction I unwound a length of bast cord from his waist and lashed its paws securely together, binding it in a struggling hoop of furious, spitting muscle. We strung our fish and hung them from a limb over the dead buck, then strung up the wriggling otter beside them. Two of our three adversaries had been bested.

What prey the eagle could find at night neither of us knew—they are not birds of the darkness—but we had both seen its nest, a vast pile of sticks wedged in the summit of a single lone pine that rose from a little shelf on the side of the lake opposite Kalimar's cabin. At this season there would be young in it, and the parent birds would stay close to home.

We had about two hours of moonlight left us. Jim stripped another basswood and plaited a flat, strong strap from the soft inner bark. He looped it over a limb and tested it with his weight, and his teeth shone in a grin of satisfaction. I made him braid me a shorter strap, and searched through the stream bed until I had a handful of pebbles of the right shape and weight. I had been handy with a sling as a boy.

Nothing stirred under the great pines on Kalimar's side of the lake as we worked our way along the base of the opposite cliff. The monkey men were somewhere in the lower valley, guarding the exit, but the hounds and Kalimar himself were over there somewhere, watching us. I was sure of it. And I wondered how long he would abide by his bargain.

The pine went up for fifty feet without a branch. I twirled my sling and sent a stone buzzing up into the darkness. It plumped against the trunk just below the nest.

A wide crack angled up the cliff back of the tree, ending in a lump of rock as big as a desk, some fifty feet up. Jim pointed to it. "Can you get up there?" he asked. "You'll be high enough to cover me with that sling of yours. Our adversary should have a mate this time."

I'm no good at climbing and never have been, but there didn't seem to be much choice. I kicked off my bark shoes, stuffed the pebbles in my mouth, hung the sling around my neck, and started up.

Jim was climbing as I have seen Polynesian natives climb, using the strap as a sort of safety belt, digging his bare toes into the rough bark. His quartz knife glittered in his teeth. As I watched he gained the first branches and vanished among them, and I gingerly squatted down and emptied my handful of pebbles out of my aching mouth. It was a mercy that I hadn't swallowed them on the way up!

The keening began long before he reached the nest. I suppose the noise he made roused the young birds, and they set up a hideous skirling. I could see only the edge of the nest, silhouetted against the moonlit clouds, and now Jim appeared, clinging to its overhanging side like a gigantic lizard, digging into the mass of tangled sticks for toe and finger holds and forcing himself up and

If they win ...only our dead are free

These are our enemies.
They have only one idea—to kill, and kill, and kill, until they conquer the world.
Then, by the whip, the sword and the gallows, they will rule.
No longer will you be free to speak or write your thoughts, to worship God in your own way.
Only our dead will be free. Only the host who will fall before the enemy will know peace.
Civilization will be set back a thousand years.
Make no mistake about it—you cannot think of this as other wars.
You cannot regard your foe this time simply as people with a wrong idea.
This time you win—or die. This time you get no second chance.
This time you free the world, or else you lose it.
Surely that is worth the best fight of your life
—worth anything that you can give or do.

Throughout the country there is increasing need for civilian war service. To enlist the help of every citizen, the Government has organized the Citizens Service Corps as part of local Defense Councils. If there is no Defense Council in your community, or if it has not set up a Service Corps, help to organize one. If one exists, cooperate with it in every possible way. Write this magazine for a free booklet telling you what to do and how to do it. Join the fight for Freedom—now!

EVERY CIVILIAN A FIGHTER

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out. Then from the heights above me sounded a shrill, ringing scream and down out of the night hurtled the black form of the eagle's mate.

There was an answering scream from across the lake. Jim was on his feet now, a slim white figure in the moonlight. The eagle plunged straight at his head, only to swing aside a few scant feet above him. I could see the telltale light patches on its tail as it swung upward.

As the great bird swooped again I let fly with the sling. The pebble thumped against its plummeting body with a sound I could hear plainly, and the eagle broke its dive and slipped away into the darkness. Just then the second bird appeared, high over the lake, swooping with folded wings straight at Jim's head.

I had the range and my second stone went as true as the first. It struck just as the huge bird flung out its wings and tail to brake its descent. One wing crumpled and the eagle seemed to fold up in midair. Then Jim fell forward on his knees and I heard a single scream of fury as he seized it. At that moment the first bird struck again.

I had one fleeting glimpse of its gigantic wings spread out against the moon, and heard the drone of the wind through its taut feathers. Then needles of fire stabbed into my upflung arm and I was hurled back against the cliff as the eagle's hooked talons bit into my flesh. I dropped the sling and grabbed at the harsh, scaly legs that felt like iron bars. My heel came down on empty air and I went over backward into emptiness.

The lake was deep under the cliff. I hit feet first and went down until I thought my ears would burst. The eagle's claws were set fast in my muscles, and its wings lashed at the water in terror. Then my head burst through the surface and the bird let go. Half drowned, I floundered ashore and lay panting on the rocks under the tree. A moment later Jim landed beside me in a shower of bark. He had the male bird, alive.

His eyes glittered as we lashed the bloody wolf skin to the eagle's talons. The great bird could easily carry it—and would. At it flapped heavily off across the lake toward Kalimar's lodge, Jim leaped up on a rock and let out a blood-curdling scream. He was chuckling as he came back:

"Mohawk yell," he explained. "It should give him something to think about."

But we were doing some thinking before we reached the pass. Jim had insisted on wading down the creek bed as far as we could before clambering up to the trail. It showed as a light, wavering streak of trampled earth against the moist, dark humus of the forest floor. As we reached it, across the dark water of the lake came the savage baying of the hounds of Kalimar.

Jim seemed to have cat's eyes but my own progress was pretty slow. I had lost one bark shoe, and the broken granite which lined the path tortured my bare foot. Presently the hounds gave tongue again, this time much closer. I bumped into Jim, a shadow among the shadows, listening intently.

"They've found our kill," he said. "It may hold them for a little."

The going had been bad enough in daylight, and now even the moon was low and the shadows long. Jim was well ahead of me, and he seemed to be searching along the side of the trail for something. Presently he stopped and rummaged in the undergrowth at the base of a huge scarred pine. He held something out to me.

"Your tobacco pouch," he explained. "I slipped it out of your coat pocket and tossed it in there."

The baying of Kalimar's great hounds was echoing among the tumbled rocks as we came out into the moonlight at the summit of the pass. They were close! I recognized the place where we had met the white panther. Jim grabbed my arm and pulled me after him down into a black cranny behind the flat block where she had lain. The murmur of under-

ground water grew louder as we scrambled down into the blackness. Then the crack ended at the bottom of a deep shaft among the rocks. Something moved in the darkness on its far side, and the

panther suddenly stood there, frosted by the pale gleam of starlight from above.

Jim's fingers pressed me back warningly into the crevice. He stepped slowly out to confront the giant cat, and she crouched back, the tip of her tail twitching, her green eyes fixed on him. He took a pinch of tobacco from my pouch and laid it on the sand between them. Then he began to talk.

It was not the guttural language which Kalimar and the monkey men had

used. I think it was his own Mohawk tongue. The Iroquois are born orators, and Jim's low voice was proud and humble, demanding and cajoling by turns. At the end of each phrase he added a pinch to the little pile of tobacco at his feet.

He finished and stepped back, his arms folded, waiting. For a moment the panther did not move, then she stepped slowly forward and sniffed his offering. She touched it gently with one huge paw; then she was gone, passing me so close that her rough fur brushed my naked thigh. Silently I followed Jim into the cave from which she had appeared.

A mewling cry greeted us. Jim chuckled and went down on his knees in the blackness. The cat odor was stifling in the place. Something brushed my ankle; I reached down and needle-sharp teeth worried my hand. The panther had kittens here.

Their cry brought her back. She bulked huge in the opening of the little grotto, her eyes slits of green fire. She was nervous, uncertain. Jim spoke to her again—a few guttural words—and she turned away, and began to pace restlessly up and down the sandy floor of the shaft.

There was a scrabble of claws above us in the crevice, and the long line of the panther's back stiffened, her round ears flattened against her skull. A moment later one of the hounds appeared at the other side of the pit. It seemed as big as a horse in that light. Its fangs bared as it saw the great cat. Its mate appeared beside it, and it threw back its shaggy head and uttered a long, chilling howl that echoed hideously in the narrow shaft. At that moment the panther pounced.

Her claws raked the face of the leading hound and the momentum of her charge threw him back. Then she was back on her haunches, batting at them like a kitten at a string, while they tried to circle and get in under her guard. One savage blow tore open the side of the largest hound's head and ripped away part of its ear, but the other dog closed with her and all three went down in a struggling, snarling heap.

Jim was rummaging in the back of the cave. The panther had dragged in dry grass to line her den, and it was like tinder. He twisted together a club-shaped mass and fished in the tobacco pouch for the spare matches I always carry there. In a second the torch was blazing. He crowded past the frightened kittens and reached the cave mouth just as the big cat broke away and backed toward us, her white fur drenched with blood. One hound was limping off, its flanks cut to ribbons, but the other stood its ground, head down, its savage eyes burning. As Jim appeared it sprang. He thrust the blazing grass into its snarling face and rolled aside. Then from above came a hoarse shout. Kalimar!

The hound heard it. Pawing at its singed muzzle, it stalked stiffly to the crevice and vanished. The panther settled down at the mouth of the cave, licking her wounds, and the three kittens came wabbling out to paw and nuzzle at her. Jim pulled me back into the den, where we would be out of sight from the top of the pit.

"The old ways have their uses," he said thoughtfully. "When I was a boy, my mother's brothers taught me the ancient customs of our people. I went out by myself into the forest, and fasted and dreamed, and in my dream a white panther came and laid a fawn at my feet, and stood over me while I ate. When I woke I knew that it had become my spirit guardian and would always help me in time of danger. My elder uncle, who was a wise man, taught me the ways in which men can speak with the beasts. But I grew up and went to college and forgot the old superstitions—until now. I have asked Ha-ace for help, and we will have her protection while she lives, but I will not ask her to die for us. Kalimar may boast of being the friend

of the beasts, but he is ruthless. He will kill anything that gets in his way."

I had been studying the shaft at whose bottom we lay. Huge blocks of granite from the cliffs above had fallen in such a way as to form this pit, open at the top and nearly twenty feet deep. The crevice by which we had entered came down at one corner, where the boulders did not quite meet.

"Jim," I whispered. "If we can reach the top of that first block, there in the corner, I think we can get out. If the panther creates a diversion, Kalimar may not discover us. What about it?"

"The monkey men are still guarding the lower valley, if Kalimar hasn't called them in," he pointed out. "No—we win our fight, or lose it, here. But I think I see how it can be done. Come."

He spoke in a low voice to the panther and she got silently to her feet and crouched at the lower end of the crevice. Jim braced himself in the corner of the shaft, making me a back. On the second try I hooked my fingers over the edge of the great block that formed the wall, and dragged myself up to where I could get a grip on a dangling root. Once I had a foothold it was fairly easy. The hemlocks grew thick on top of the rock, and I pulled myself cautiously up into their shelter. I could see nothing in the dim starlight, but from the direction of the trail I could hear the lapping of one of the hounds licking its wounds.

Kalimar's warped brain made him a dangerous adversary. He gloried in his pre-human ancestry, and his pride and contempt of humanity might be too great for him to carry a gun, but he had been practical enough to arm the monkey men. It was a chance we had to take.

Jim's low whistle told me when they started up the crevice. I gathered together a handful of the dry twigs and hemlock needles which covered the rock, counting the seconds: five—six—seven. At thirty they should be ready. And at thirty I struck our last match and thrust

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it into the heap of powder-dry debris.

The flame shot up in a yellow sheet, licking through the dead lower branches of the evergreens and lighting up the entire gorge. I saw Kalimar, his monocle gleaming, staring in amazement; and the hounds behind him. He had no gun. Before he knew what had happened Jim and the panther were out and fighting. One hound brought the great cat into the fray, her sickle claws tearing at the sides of the foremost hound, her teeth buried in its neck. I saw Jim bury one fist in Kalimar's hairy paunch and send the other smashing into his receding jaw. The monocle arced up at the end of its cord, and the human ape went down. Then I was in it myself, brandishing a blazing branch and shouting like a madman.

Beasts fear fire. As Kalimar struggled to his feet I thrust the torch into his ugly face, and he screamed in terror. Sparks from the fire I had started were raining down around us. There was a strong breeze from the lower valley, and the blaze was moving up the pass toward the lake, cutting off his retreat. He screamed again and began to run. Then with a snarl the second hound was at Jim's throat and they went down.

Before I could move, the panther came to the rescue. The first hound was dead, its neck broken. The force of her attack bowled the second beast over, exposing its belly, and in an instant the cat had ripped it open. It was over.

Jim's shoulder was gashed, but the wound was not serious. The fire had blocked the pass from wall to wall, licking high against its sides. Kalimar had broken through before the trail was cut off, but he was trapped unless he could keep under water in the lake until the flames died down. The lower valley was safe, and I hoped the fire would burn itself out without crossing the mountain into the cut-over land on the other slope. But we had something more to think about. The two monkey men were still somewhere behind us, guarding the way out.

Jim comes of a race which could outstalk the wariest of beasts in its own terrain. The panther had vanished into her cave, to make sure of her kittens' safety. We left the trail, where they would expect to see us, and followed the base of the northern cliff to the headwaters of the little stream on which we had camped. The sound of the water masked our own scramble down the steep creek bed. Jim left me a few hundred yards above the camp site and went on alone.

One of the little men was standing against the trunk of a huge spruce, watching the trail. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east, and the glare of the fire was painting the whole western sky. I could see the gleam of his rifle barrel as he shifted his position restlessly.

Jim moved like a shadow. I saw him as he scaled the creek bank, then lost him behind the huge fallen tree beside which we had camped. When I glimpsed him again he had his hunting knife. Like the tobacco pouch, he had cached it when he smelled danger.

A twig may have broken under his foot. The monkey man may have scented him. It spun suddenly and the rifle barked—then he was on it. In a moment it was all over.

The other guard was probably watching the swamp where the stream left the valley. Jim reloaded the rifle, and we lay on our bellies under a spruce, waiting for him. It was safer to fight it out now on equal terms than to have him behind us. The shot should bring him, and it did.

Jim waited until he saw the body of the other guard. "Drop your gun," he commanded. "I can shoot before you move."

It may have been terror. It may have been courage. The little beast man spun like a cat. His first shot spanged off a rock inches in front of me; the second burrowed into the soil between us. Then Jim's gun spoke.

The roar and crackle of the fire was plain now. The whole upper valley must be ablaze. Then above it I heard the drone of a plane. Kalimar!

Five minutes' climb brought us out on an open spur. The western sky was one sheet of flame, but out of it, circling laboriously like some gigantic moth, rose Kalimar's silver plane. The air currents over the blaze tossed the big ship around like a drifting puff of ash, but he kept it climbing. Higher—higher—in a few seconds he could drop over the ridge and be safe. But something happened. The heat may have exploded his gas tank. A tongue of white flame licked out from the climbing plane. Its wings tilted; its nose dropped; then it rolled over in midair and plunged into the holocaust below.

The little monkey men had been courageous adversaries. We had no way of digging graves, but we made a platform of branches and laid them on it, high above the ground, as Jim's people had once done with their dead. It was more than Kalimar would have done.

Who Kalimar was we will never know. Jim thinks he belongs to that ancient hybrid race, half Neanderthal and half *Sapiens*, which arose from the men of the Carmel caves. The monkey men must have belonged to an even older strain. There have been stories of such hairy folk in high Asia and in the jungle of India. There is no reason why they should not have survived, shut away from the more efficient killers who founded our own race, until the world grew sufficiently civilized to tolerate them. Kalimar clearly had wealth and position, and his great, savage hounds were of a royal Russian breed. They hunt me yet, sometimes, in my dreams, until the green eyes of Jim's guardian panther appear in the shadows and her ghost-white form gleams in the starlight. Jim has bought land in the little valley —Kalimar had been a squatter there—and posted it. We never go there, but the great cat and her kind can hunt it in peace for as long as we two live.

THE END.

Book Reviews

PROPHETS AND CRITICS

By Anthony Boucher

Boswell, Rolfe. PROPHETS AND PORTENTS. SEVEN SEERS FORETELL HITLER'S DOOM. New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1942. 154 pp.

Parry, Albert. SPEAKING OF PROPHECIES—An essay-review of John Cournos' "A Book of Prophecy." In *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 25, 1942, pp. 7f.

Robb, Stewart. THE DOOM OF GERMANY ACCORDING TO THE PROPHECY OF ST. ODILE. New York, Kings Printing Co., 1942. 13 pp.

In a recent review (Unknown Worlds, December, 1942), I attempted to simplify the approach to prophecy by a destinction of three types of prophetic utterance: the hortatory, the logical, and the oracular. The hortatory prophet warns of what will happen unless certain things are done. The logical prophet deduces from the present state of affairs what the future must be. The oracular prophet leaps into the future darkness and states certain coming events, not as plausible results or consequences, but as known facts.

These distinct types of prophecy are sorely confused in the minds of current writers. John Cournos, in his "Book of Prophecy," jumbles all three together helter-skelter. Mr. Boswell lays his emphasis on the oracular; but in his preface says, in effect, "How can you deny the possibility of prophecy? Look at Homer Lea," whose brilliant predictions of Japanese strategy are an outstanding example of strictly logical prophecy. To be sure, Mr. Boswell adds, "This book, however, does not deal with predictions of the Lea type." But he has meanwhile managed to convey the impression that because it was possible for the hunchbacked analyst in 1909 to deduce the actions of Japan in 1941, it was, therefore possible for St. Odile in the eighth century to foresee the career of Hitler in the twentieth.

Now the importance of keeping the distinction clear is this: Both the hortatory and the logical types of prophecy can be useful to man. The hortatory is by its very nature an injunction to religious or social reform, an invitation to man to take a certain road lest the terrors prophesied befall him. The logical can serve the same purpose; it predicts what must ensue from the current state of things. Well, if we change the current state of things—

But oracular prophecy implies no alternative. It is a statement of something that lies ahead in a fixed space-time continuum. It is darkly couched and can be fully understood only after the event. Its sole interest to the rational man is as a fact that does not fit into the present scheme of knowledge. That certain individuals have seen into the future is a matter of the same nature as Mr. Fort's rains of fish or image-printed hailstones. It is not the fact itself which is significant, but the fact that that fact exists, and that our con-

cept of the world does not allow for it.

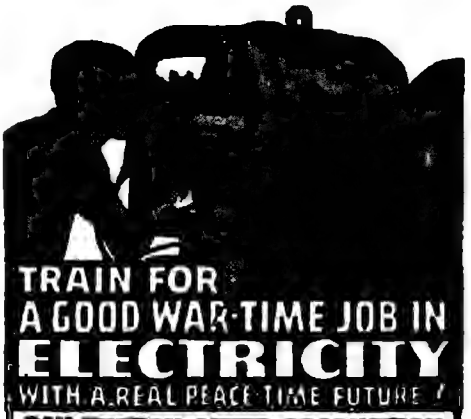
The first question to be answered is inevitably: Does that fact exist? As one who has never been quite convinced, despite all argument, that enough monkeys at enough typewriters would eventually turn out the works of Shakespeare, complete with variants from the Bad Quartos, I am sufficiently impressed by a few remarkably successful prophecies, chiefly by Nostradamus, as to believe that the subject deserves serious investigation.

But serious investigation is the last object in the view of the contemporary writer on prophecy. The general attitude is frankly avowed in the title of Mr. Robb's pamphlet and the subtitle of the Boswell collection, "Seven Steers Foretell Hitler's Doom."

It would be foolhardy to ask: "What do the seers foretell in this present war?" and then try to find the answer. But it would at least be a reasonably honest approach. Instead the method is this: Decide how you want the war to end. Pick out the prophets whose words can be somehow twisted to predict that end. Shout their forecast loud enough and often enough and eventually Hitler—who notoriously believes in prophecy—will see how futile it all is and give up.

William Seabrook's plan to destroy the Fuehrer by black magic is a trifle more practical.

Mr. Parry, a hobbyist and collector of prophecies, at least has no truck with nonsense and confusion. He is interested solely in the logical form, and admits it. "Nor do I have patience," he says, "with anyone's claim to, or acceptance of, occult powers." He adds to the Cournos collection such interesting specimens of the logical forecast as Oliver Evans' description, in 1813, of the streamlined train and Admiral Dewey's presage, in 1898, of the Japanese capture of the Philippines, and concludes with the plausible suggestion that prophecies come true *because* they



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have been made—that Lea's analysis of coming Japanese strategy, for instance, itself molded that strategy.

The impatience of Mr. Parry is understandable to the most devout occultist after reading the utterances of Mr. Boswell's Seven Seers. These Seven Who Foretell Hitler's Doom are St. Odile, the anonymous author of the Orval MS—attributed to Nostradamus—Mother Shipton, three obscure German prophets, and the contemporary Boriska Silbiger. Other chapters of the book treat the papal prophecies attributed to St. Malachy, Heinrich Heine's description of German fascism—a strictly logical prophecy, this, but a brilliant one—and the cult of pyramidology-cum-Anglo-Israelitism, which is too much even for Mr. Boswell.

The outstanding common characteristics of most of these prophecies are indefiniteness and bad documentation. Mr. Boswell skips lightly over the latter point, but even in his treatment it is clear that there is no reason to suppose, in many cases, that these prophecies were written until after the earlier events which they describe, and from which Mr. Boswell concludes that their dooming of Hitler is apt to be equally accurate. And that dooming usually takes a lot of generalization. Prophecies that cry out, "Woe to thee, Cologne!" are fairly safe; if you want to go on record now as saying, "Woe to thee, Kalamazoo!" you can be fairly sure that within a few centuries a fire, a flood, a quake, or a war will make you a first-rate prophet.

The Messrs. de Camp and Wells have, in the columns of Unknown Worlds, inveighed against the obscure trickery of Nostradamus and accused me of simply playing games in interpreting him. There is a trace of justice in their accusations; but when you play games with Nostradamus, you can get extraordinarily specific results—places, names, and dates. This is quite a different matter from saying, "St. Odile foretells that things are going to be awful. Well, they are awful, aren't they?"

As to the more specific elements of the Odile prophecy: According to her time table of lunar cycles, the turning point of the war came in December, 1941. In that month the tide of victory turned in favor of the United Nations.

The whole question of the prophecy of St. Odile, to which Mr. Boswell devotes a chapter and Mr. Robb a succinct and ingenious pamphlet, is a confusing one. There seems to exist in the minds of prophecy-commentators a curious legend that St. Odile is famous chiefly for this screed and that she is the patron saint of prophecy. I have consulted many reference works, including Welschinger's 188-page "Life of Odile"—Paris, 1901—and the articles in the Catholic Encyclopedia—1911—and the Benedictine Fathers' "Book of Saints"—1937—and nowhere, outside of the current doom-Hitler crop, do I find any reference to her in connection with prophecy.

Odile was a noble maiden of the eighth century who was born blind, miraculously recovered her eyesight when she first received the Eucharist, founded a convent, proved herself an efficiently administrative abbess, and performed several miracles herself, notably saving her father's soul from purgatory by direct intercession. She is the patroness of Alsace, and the pro-German and pro-French parties unite in devotion to her and in naming their daughters Odile. My wife, who spent several years in Alsace, is weary of the very name of Odile—though the nuns at Mont St. Odile serve notable beer—but never heard a prophecy mentioned once.

I have so far not been able to trace the prophecy back further than 1916, when it was employed for propaganda purposes in the last war. The poor abbess seems to be a forgery-prone;

the Grande Encyclopédie describes autobiographies, genealogies, and testaments, all attributed to her, and all proved false.

Much the same dubiety of origin attaches to the Orval prophecy—which should have been fulfilled many years ago—Mr. Boswell exercises great ingenuity in stretching it to the present—the Malachy list of popes, and the fatidic doggerel of Mother Shipton.

One of Mr. Boswell's seers, however, is so remarkable as to be worth in herself the price of admission. This is Boriska Silbiger, a Hungarian, who employed none of the paraphernalia of occultism but simply issued a forecast each year from 1933 until 1939, when she was imprisoned in a concentration camp. One sample of her work will indicate her quality; in 1935 she said:

> In January of the ensuing year, the king of a great empire will die suddenly. He will be succeeded by his eldest son, but the reign of his successor will not last twelve months, whereafter he will renounce the throne.

The ensuing year, 1936, brought the death of George V and the brief reign and abdication of Edward VIII.

This is not an isolated example. There are a half dozen others as good. And the last Silbiger utterance, the prophecy that brought down upon her the wrath of the Gestapo, reads:

> The war will end with Hitler's death and the collapse of Nazism. The world after the peace comes will be so different and there will be such national and social upheavals that it is impossible to describe it.

Unfortunately in this, his most impressive subject, Mr. Boswell's documentation is even scantier than usual. He mentions only that her forecasts were printed "in thirty-odd newspapers in various parts of the globe." *The New York Times Index, The Official Index to the*—London—*Times, The International Index to Periodicals,* and *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* have never heard of her.

Boriska Silbiger provides the perfect closing illustration. What is significant is not that she prophesies Hitler's doom, but that she did prophesy Edward's. If that forecast can be validly documented, it must mean revision of our whole concept of time and of the functions of the human mind. (Figure the odds involved in the many details of its accuracy and then say, "Monkeys and typewriters;" if you dare.) If it makes you happy to think that she has doomed Hitler, too, I suppose it's a harmless pleasure; but don't let that cheerful confidence reduce your War Bond quota.

THE MAGUS

By Comte de L'Avre

Here is a book of English origin on magic that is most awe-inspiring. Even its outward appearance commands respect. It is of a fine thick quarto size with blood-red binding and a leather back with a gold imprint of a bearded jinni riding a fiery dragon. Originals of this work are exceedingly rare and demand prodigious prices. This book, "The Magus," written by one Francis Barrett, F. R. C., was published in London at the Temple of the Muses in 1801.

"The Magus," which has a subtitle of "Celestial Intelligencer," may be called with justification the Anglo-Saxon bible of magic. Other countries possess older books on magic in their own languages. Although these other or non-English works may be older in point of publication, "The Magus" contains the most practical rules of all other rare old works on magic. Barrett has presented therein principles and secrets in such an enchanting yet startling manner that one is convinced that "The Magus" possesses supernatural power constrained within its grisly covers. Barrett him-

self was such a successful and famous magician that he brought about a real revival of occultism throughout all England.

"The Magus" is divided into sections called Book I and Book II. Book I has two parts which deal in turn with natural magic, alchemy and talismanic magic. Book II deals with cabalistic magic and has four parts as follows:

Part I—Magical knowledge and power.

Part II—Ceremonial magic.

Part III—Composition and use of magical circle.

Part IV—Magical invocation of spiritual beings.

There is also an appendix which gives a short biography of seventeen great magicians.

There are fifteen large steel-engraved plates in "The Magus" in addition to numerous charts and diagrams. These exquisite plates were designed by Barrett but engraved by R. Griffith. The plates give magical seals and ciphers of spirits and supernatural intelligences, talismans of the different metals and planets, geomantic characters, the sigils of the various names of God, fallen angels, good and evil demons and illustrations of magical instruments, cabalistic figures and other magical paraphernalia.

The heads and faces of eleven rulers and dignitaries of the shadow world are portrayed in several of these plates. Barrett guarantees the exactness of these portraits, as he took care to draw them himself while in their presence. Later these drawings were turned over to his engraver. These faces and countenances are colored in somber shades. They are so grotesque and exert such an unpleasant hypnotic attraction as one gazes on them that there can be little doubt of the reality of their originals. The longer a person looks at them the harder it is to remove his eyes from them.

The natural magic of Part I, Book I, explains that man lost his magical powers as a result of his separation from God. A way of gaining back these magical powers is given. Then the correct use of such magical powers on amulets, enchantments, philters, potions and charms is explained. The charms or amulets will be of no value unless the operator impregnates some of his vitality, his very soul into the charm or amulet. Thus strange emotions and passions can be induced upon the various charms "by magical vapors, confections, perfumes, unguents, potions, poisons, lamps, lights, et cetera." Also in Part I is given the method that is least expensive and troublesome for obtaining the philosopher's stone. This is the magical method. The author himself vouches for it and quotes the proofs of other alchemists, too. The name and most important principles of the only work on cabalistic alchemy are referred to. The English title of this work is "Purifying Fire." Thereby were the magicians of old enabled to always be in possession of enough gold for their needs. Barrett gives one of the rules of the magical alchemist as follows:

> Covet not much gold, but learn to be satisfied with enough; for to desire more than enough, is to offend the Deity.

Here, too, the success of the magician depends upon the development of his magical powers.

Part II of Book I covers one hundred pages that treat of talismanic magic. This is perhaps the most complete treatise in existence of this "delightful knowledge and abstruse science." First the theories of both the terrestrial and celestial operations are explained. Various details of the operations are then given, such as suffumigations or incense, rings, numbers, the use of the four magical tables of the divine intelligences. These four tables depict thirty-nine strange and apparently unintelligible figures or sym-

bols called sigils. Several plates are found in this section which contain magical squares of numbers. These magical squares were so potent that even Madame Blavatsky warned against leaving them exposed to the casual observer. The method of divination and prophecy by the use of talismans is also given. Geomancy, another old method of prediction, which so fascinated Napoleon Bonaparte, is elucidated with explanations and engraved characters. This section ends with twelve magical seals of the different metals. These seals have been copied and used since by all lesser works on magic.

Book II, Part I, explain the important function that physical magnetism or, as it is sometimes known, mesmerism plays in sorcery, enchantment, necromancy and other magical procedures. Part II of Book II gives the secret mysteries of ceremonial magic. These secrets tell how to rule, order and govern angels, intelligences and spirits. This section also contains various invocations for good and evil spirits. It is also here that the reader will find the drawings of the chiefs of the underworld. In fact, at the end of this second section of Book II there is reproduced the figure of the bearded jinni which is on the back of the book. The colors of this jinni, who is really the chief of spirits and is known as Cassiel Macotor, are in direct contrast to those of the other spirits, being painted in vivid greens, reds, browns and yellows.

Part III of Book II is contained in twenty-one pages in which are given the geometrical constructions and the methods of evocations of the magical circle. There must be a differently constructed circle for the various exorcisms of fire, air, water and earth, as well as the different conjurations of the seven days of the week. Part IV gives a short summary of the magical teachings of the great Trithemius. Trithemius was the teacher of Paracelsus. The main teaching of Trithemius which Barrett emphasizes is that of the con-

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jurations of spirits into a crystal ball. These rules and directions form the basis for all modern systems of crystal gazing. Dr. John Dee perfected this type of conjuration of spirits to such a state wherein he could gaze into the various higher planes of heaven. The appendix gives the biographies of such magicians as Apollonius, Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus, Dr. Dee and others.

At the end of "The Magus" there appears a very interesting advertisement in which Barrett "respectfully informs" those who wish to go further into the practices of magic, et cetera, should apply at his residence between the hours of 11:00 and 2:00 o'clock for further instruction. Sax Rohmer in his book, "The Romance of Sorcery," was so impressed with the powers of "The Magus" that he quoted very little from it, because he didn't want people to dabble in dangerous matters.

For those who are interested and wish to dabble, the translation and exact copy of the conjuration of the most beneficent of spirits is hereby given. This conjuration is good and is said to bring good fortune and happiness. This magical formula is, of course, taken from Book II, Part III, of "The Magus."

I conjure and confirm upon you, ye strong and holy angels, by the names Cados, Cados, Cados, Eschereie, Eschereie, Eschereie, Hatim, Ya, strong founder of the worlds; Cantine, Jaym, Janic, Anic, Calbot, Sabbac, Berisay, Alnaym; and by the name Adonai, who created fishes and creeping things in the water, and birds upon the face of the earth, flying toward heaven, in the fifth day; and by the names of the angels serving in the sixth host before Pastor, a holy angel, and a great and powerful prince and by the name of his star, which is Jupiter, and by the name of his seal, and the name of Adonai, the great God, Creator of all things, and by the name of all the stars, and by their power and virtue, and by all the names aforesaid, I conjure thee, Sachiel, a great Angel, who are chief ruler of Thursday, that for me thou labor for me, and fulfill all my petitions according to my will and desire in my cause and business.

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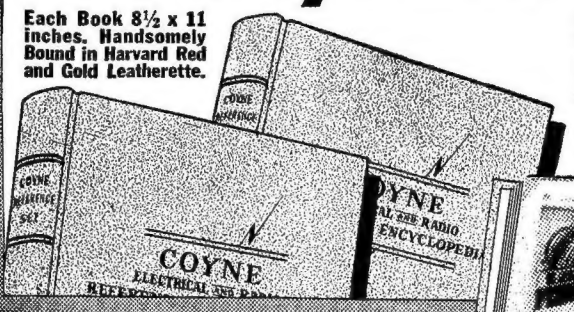

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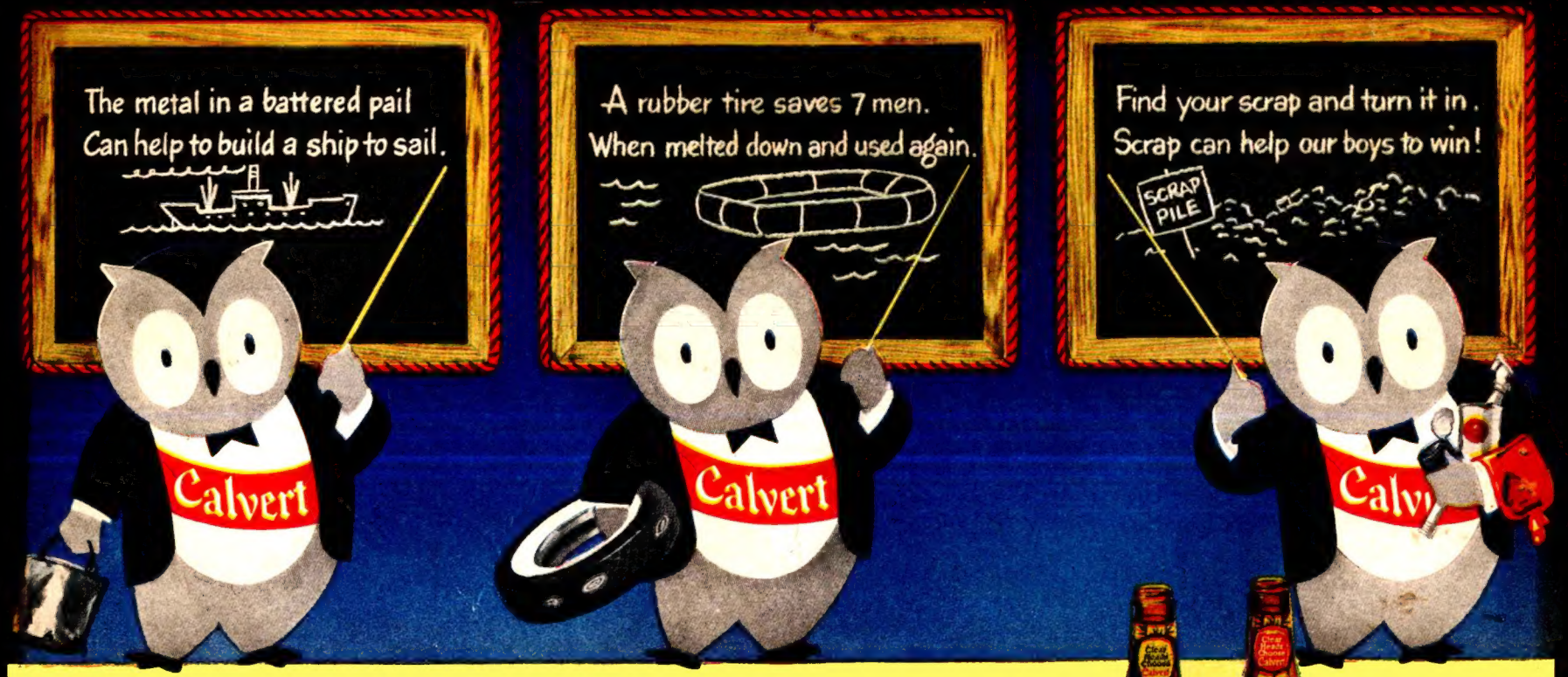
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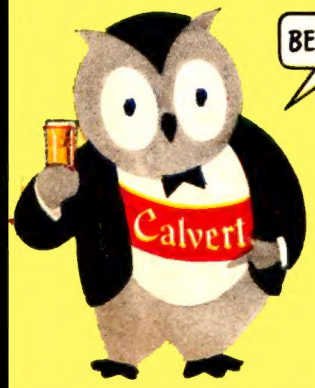

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